

**out where the lightning splits the sea by stardustupinlights**

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**Summary:**

“Shut up—” Percy tries, the stress getting to him. His heartbeat beats wildly in his ears and he has no idea if Grover is alive or if he’s a statue now, he has no idea what Annabeth’s pained whimpers mean. This is worse than the Minotaur— there, he could do something. He found a way. But right now, he can’t see an exit to this. “You don’t know me—”

“Oh, but I do. I was slain by Perseus once, already, after all. I gave birth to two children for Poseidon, two sons for the sea. I know you better than you know yourself, Percy Jackson. I know of the pain that awaits a little hero like you. I can already see you, losing your innocence, giving in to the call of the sea—”

“Shut up!”

“—the call of your father—”

“No!”

“I know of what cruelty you would be capable of, destroyer, Περσεύς! Your father reaps what he sows, and he has plans for you, if he has allowed you to breathe another minute!”

Something snaps.

**Relationships:** Amphitrite & Percy Jackson, Lee Fletcher & Percy Jackson, Percy Jackson & Sally Jackson, Silena Beauregard & Lee Fletcher, Silena Beauregard & Percy Jackson

**Comments:** 236

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# 1. Chapter 1

## Author's Note:

hello! sooo this is a new project i've been writing for a while, a bit of my own take on the PJO universe and, let's be real, wish fulfillment and a headcanon gallore. i've been really excited about this for ages and i hope you guys like it! i got most of this like, done. currently all i have left to write is the end of the book, and i'm estimating 12 parts. so like, let me know if you like it, i would really appreciate it and i hope we can have fun with it!

enjoy!

After the Minotaur, Percy dreams. First about Gabe earlier today, making him drink a beer with him and his pals, stealing his money and then reminding him that since he just got himself expelled from Yancy, that meant he was now going to be working for him at his shop—that isn't even his shop—for the rest of his miserable life because he doesn't plan to help mom pay another private school deposit.

Then he dreams of Montauk, the tears in mom's eyes as he asked about dad, her rough hands holding his own.

"Percy," she says, her eyes reflecting his own green ones, wet and wide, colored with pain that seems older than Percy himself. "I haven't been completely honest with you, baby."

"What do you mean?" Percy asks, trying not to panic. Mom often looks emotional when she talks about dad; how he didn't know she was pregnant when he set out to the sea, how their relationship was just a little fling and nothing serious, how she has never heard from him again. "Mom?"

"Your father," she starts, looking out at the shore, the waves hitting the beach, the clouds forming about them. She swallows, apprehensive, scared. More terrified than Percy has ever seen her in his life. "He... he isn't lost, Percy. Perhaps he is to me— but not to you. And I hope you can forgive me

for what I'm about to say to you, honey, but you're at that age and I think it's time—"

Thunder rumbles, sharp and loud, so close that they both jump, and then the rain starts falling; fat, fast droplets that have them drenched in seconds, even as they grab their things and run back to their cabin. Mom stares out the window afterwards, deadly quiet, looking at the ocean, and Percy holds her hand and squeezes, and he wouldn't be able to pretend he doesn't start begging.

"Mom, *please*," it goes. "Mom, what were you saying about dad? Why— is he a criminal? Did he do something to you? Mom?"

"Later. Today isn't a good day to do it," Mom says, turning to look at him and running a hand through his hair. She still looks terrified, even more so than before, pale, and her hands are shaking. Tears well up in her eyes, and she drops to her knees, holding his face between her hands. "Gods, Percy, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry, baby. I'll tell you, I promise, but now I— there's a place your father wanted you to go, Percy. I've never trusted it. But you *have* to go and I've been too selfish keeping you with me for this long."

"I don't understand," Percy whispers, shaking his head, feeling like his heart is breaking among the confusion of seeing his mom be this upset, of the sting of knowing she plans to send him away from her again, of the apparent lies he's been told yet has no further knowledge on.

"You don't have to understand now," Mom takes a deep breath, and leans in, closing her eyes, pressing her forehead against his own like she's done many times before. "For now, Percy... you can have this back."

It is then that a memory comes back to Percy, almost like a stray thought, striking him like the lighting rumbling outside with the storm.

Standing there, watching his mom break down over things he didn't know or understand, he realizes he always knew there was something off about his father. Like a veil was removed from over his eyes and he could finally see reality and himself for what it was.

The realization comes unrelated from the things he had already noticed as odd in his life before. It wasn't because of the way his mom dodged questions about him, with a guilty look in her eyes. It wasn't because of her decision to marry Gabriel Ugliano, claiming he would help them keep afloat, even though they were fine without him. And it wasn't because she always seemed to look over her shoulder when they went out together, a habit she couldn't hide no matter how hard she tried.

No, Percy knows with certainty now that something isn't right, because he met the man.

It was not a nice memory to recall, unlike that hint of a warm smile that he's clinged to for years and years. Instead, it was dramatically different, in both tone and intent, and much sharper.

His father did not smile, in the memory. He did not hold him. Like a switch has been flipped in his brain, Percy remembers that he used to have nightmares about the look in his eyes, green like his own, as he stood over his crib. Narrowed, intense, dark. Judging. There was contempt in there, too, like he couldn't quite decide if what he was looking at—his *son*—was worth the trouble.

Then Grover knocks on their door and Percy wakes up to a blonde girl trying to interrogate him, only to pass out again. The next time he wakes up, for real now, Mr. Brunner—Chiron—takes him aside after meeting Mr. D, who's supposed to be a god but Percy still doesn't know if he trusts that, looking at him with sad, wide eyes.

"I see you know something now that you didn't before," he said, squeezing his shoulder. Between the disorientation of the things that he's been told, the loss of his mother, and his seemingly regained memory of his father, Percy feels the reassuring, kind gesture down to his bones, and almost tears up. "Do you care to share, Percy?"

Fear chokes his throat. "No, sir. I think I'll be fine."

Chiron's expression drops even more, if possible, but he doesn't push, walking him further into camp so he can give him a tour. Percy glances at

the attic to see movement at the window, but Chiron denies that anything living is in there.

Then he gets thrown at Annabeth and Cabin Eleven and Luke, and he's still reeling from the idea of *half-blood* when that big bully, Clarisse, tries to dunk him in a toilet. The bathroom explodes, water pushing her out, but when Percy turns to Annabeth to say that it wasn't him, he finds that he can't get the words out. She stares, hard, and something in her eyes changes—her expression shuts off, and her already judgmental gaze turns cold as steel. Percy almost takes a step back from it.

“How did you do that?” She demands, like she's barking an order. The tone immediately makes him angry—how is *he* supposed to know? He only found out about this stuff barely an hour ago! “Answer me. How did you —?”

“I don't know!” Percy crosses his arms, and if possible, Annabeth frowns harder than she already was. “That—that wasn't *me*—”

“Sure,” Annabeth brings her hands up to her hair, and starts squeezing water out of her ponytail as if she's picturing his neck. “I'll pretend I believe that for now, since you're *new*.”

“And what is that supposed to mean?”

“That you don't know what the rules are,” Annabeth presses her lips into a line. “Controlling the elements like that is not going to do you any favors.”

“What?!” Percy snaps. “What does that even *mean*?”

“That thing Clarisse said, about being Big Three material?” Annabeth rolls her eyes. “It'd be more trouble than it's worth, even if it might get me out of here. You better *hope* you aren't.”

“Or what?” Percy demands, but Annabeth is already rushing out of the bathrooms. Percy follows her outside, where Clarisse is fuming in a puddle of mud—but the second she looks at Percy, her expression also shuts down, much like Annabeth's, even if it's still defiant.

“We’ll settle this on Friday,” she says, but doesn’t look pleased about it. There’s an edge of caution to it that was definitely not there before. She spits mud at his feet as she stands up, and then looks at Annabeth. “You better keep an eye on your prize, princess. You should let him know he’ll never get rid of you if he continues like this.”

Percy is really tired of asking what the hell people are even talking about, so he just shuts his mouth this time. Annabeth exchanges a look with Clarisse that he doesn’t understand, and then turns to Percy. Clarisse leaves without saying another word.

“You’ll be on my team this Friday, unless you’re claimed by someone from the other team before then. But I doubt it,” Annabeth pauses, looking him up and down. Percy doesn’t like it. “I’ll be watching you.”

Then she turns, runs away before Percy can gather his thoughts fast enough to demand a few more answers, and leaves him standing outside the bathrooms, campers gawking and whispering among each other—some of them looking at him the way Clarisse just did, with a mix of apprehension and defiance.

It’s not a great start. And no Annabeth means that his tour is cut short, so Percy just heads back to the canoeing lake and stares angrily at the water until someone taps his shoulder. He turns his head, only to find a girl he hasn’t met yet, with dark hair, and pretty eyes, probably a little older than him. Actually, all her face is disturbingly pretty, almost like mom’s, and done up with make-up, which seems kind of inefficient to him while in the middle of a summer camp.

“You know, if you keep staring at the water like that, you’re gonna make the naiads think you like them,” she says, a sweet smile on her lips. Percy turns towards the water again, blinking, and realizes that she’s right—there *are* a few teenage girls just chilling at the bottom of the lake. Huh. He hasn’t noticed. “I’m Silena. I noticed Annabeth left you alone, and I thought you might still have some questions. She isn’t exactly known for being the most straight-forward tour guide. Or, person, really.”

“No joke,” Percy snorts. “I’m Percy—”

“Oh, I know. You’re all everyone’s talking about,” Silena rolls her eyes, but her tone is light, playful. Percy has a hard time getting mad about that again when she puts it so mildly. “Don’t worry about that, honestly. People are just nervous because you stopped Clarisse from giving you a warm welcome—I told her to stop doing that, but she’s stubborn.”

“I noticed. But, Annabeth said something, about rules and controlling water...”

Silena’s lips curl downwards. “She’s talking about the Big Three thing. You know, in case you’re a child of Poseidon, Zeus, or Hades. Demigods like that... well, they were never well-liked in the first place, but they’re sort of illegal now.”

Percy stares. “Illegal?”

“They made a pact to never have children anymore because of a prophecy, but that didn’t really last,” Silena shrugs like it’s no big deal, but there’s an underlying uneasiness to her posture, her shoulders closing in on herself. “Only five years ago, a daughter of Zeus showed up. Her name was Thalia.”

Percy doesn’t like how Silena goes quiet. “What happened to her?”

“She died on the hill,” she gestures at the camp entrance, where a huge pine tree sits. “She almost killed a god.”

“*What?*” Silena smiles like that’s the normal reaction—which, Percy would *hope*. “I—how?”

“Big Three children are too powerful. Hades was angry that Zeus had broken their deal, so he sent all sorts of stuff after her.” Silena looks out at the lake, and something about her expression makes Percy uneasy. Like she saw this with her own eyes, five years ago. “She wasn’t alone—a satyr and two other demigods were with her, so she prioritized getting them into camp. Her father turned her into that tree as punishment, which is as good as dead.”



Things weren't making sense before, but now it's even worse. "As *punishment*? For being a hero?"

"No," Silena shakes her head. "No, for almost killing a god. Our parents don't take well to that sort of thing, Percy."

"That seems harsh." Percy swallows, and Silena nods in agreement, giving him a pitying look. As if that's only the beginning of it. "And...my dad is supposed to be one of them? A god?"

"Yes," Silena toys with a bracelet around her wrist, nervous. "As you can see, the possibility of a Big Three kid showing up puts people on edge. The rumors say the gods are fighting because something was stolen, and they're looking for a culprit."

"Percy!"

Luke's voice startles them both, and Silena tenses up like a board—shoulders square, her peaceful, friendly expression shutting down. It's the opposite reaction Percy saw Annabeth have around him, and he can't help but wonder if she doesn't like him.

Percy wouldn't blame her. Luke has this look in his eyes, like he can't wait to see your reaction to a potentially dangerous prank. It looks charming on the surface, like he's a typical troublemaker type, and his good looks help. But when he smiles down at them, it's too sharp, and only seems to grow sharper as Silena retreats on herself even more, which just looks wrong—she doesn't look like she's a shy girl.

Percy recognizes the same sadistic streak in Luke that Gabe showed whenever he made Percy try his drinks for him. Like he's enjoying you making you do something you don't want to do, or that will hurt you. There's something wrong with him.

"I thought you'd be with Annabeth," Luke says, crouching behind them, a hand on each of their shoulders. Silena is painfully still, as if used to it, and Percy doesn't like the way Luke squeezes him, digging his fingers into him

and rubbing, perhaps intending them to be soothing circles. It just makes him want to punch him. “Did she bail on you?”

“Something like that,” Percy nods, making up an excuse. “Something about a change of plans for Friday?”

“Oh, damn,” Luke chuckles. The sound is nowhere near pleasant. “Well, I’ll deal with her in private, then. What are you two talking about?”

Now, Percy hasn’t had the best impression of Annabeth so far, but suddenly he doesn’t want to leave her alone with Luke. Silena speaks up before the silence stretches for too long, a perfectly pleasant smile on her lips, like she doesn’t look like she wants his hand off her.

“Oh, I was just telling Percy about our world—you know, the basics, Empire State floor six-hundred, year-round campers, asking him who he thought his dad could be,” she says, which wasn’t at all what they were talking about, but Percy knows an out when he sees one, so he nods. “So, Percy, who do you think it could be?”

“What are the options?” He asks, noticing that Luke was about to open his mouth. Silena’s smile becomes a little more real. “I mean, I did well in my Latin class, but there’s kind of a lot...”

“Well, Hermes is Luke’s father—cabin eleven. Aphrodite is my mom, cabin ten, and before you say anything, she could still be your mom. Gods are beyond mortal limitations,” Silena giggles while Percy raises his eyebrows, but she continues before either him or Luke can interfere, talking a mile per second. “There’s Apollo and Ares, and Mr. D, though I believe that train has left the station. I guess Demeter could be an option, too, since you do have that green-eyes vibe, but she rarely has children as it is, and I’ve never heard of her being with another woman. Athena is Annabeth’s mom, something about mind-children, but you don’t really look like her son—”

“Gods, Silena,” Luke breaks in, laughing. Percy sees him squeeze her shoulder, and Silena hides a wince by running a hand through her hair. Percy has known her for all of ten minutes, but he already wants to punch

Luke's teeth out for her if it means he'll *stop touching them*. "You're gonna make him dizzy with all that information."

"Well, you know me," Silena shrugs, looking Luke right in the eyes. She doesn't even hesitate, and Percy is starting to realize that she really, really hates him. "I can't get enough of the gossip. Ever since you got the quests banned, things have been so quiet, it's only right I get to interrogate the new kid."

*Holy shit*, Percy thinks, which would probably disappoint his mom, but even though he doesn't know what she's talking about, he recognizes a dig when he sees one.

Luke's expression turns murderous for a second, but Silena doesn't even flinch. He takes a deep breath and forces out a laugh, shaking his head. "I guess you have a point—the only way to get out of camp, and I screwed it up. Annabeth's been driving me nuts because of it."

"I bet she thinks Percy is her new special omen," Silena shoots him a wink, despite the tension in the air. "I feel bad for her, honestly, so quest obsessed—who'd want to meet that crusty Oracle?"

"No one sane," Luke grins. Percy doesn't mention that he probably enters that category. Luke pats his back, turning to him. "I'm sorry to cut this conversation short, but it's almost dinner time, and I need to show you where you're sleeping."

"Oh, it's fine," Silena turns back towards the lake, sighing, and then stands up—none too subtly shrugging off Luke's hand. "I was done anyways. See you around, Percy?"

He wishes he could go with her. "Definitely."

Luke waits until she leaves to pull him up, and then shoots him an odd look. "Daughters of Aphrodite. We hate to love them, so—be careful."

Percy thinks that's a little rich, coming from the guy that acts like he's waiting for you to realize that the other shoe has already dropped, but he

agrees for the sake of being friendly. After all, they'll be sharing a cabin, and Percy doesn't fancy the idea of being smothered with a pillow in his sleep.

Now, he knows he's slow, at best, but he caught enough context out of Silena's conversation with Luke to get an idea of how things must work here. Gods claim their children sometime after they arrive at camp, and until they do, they crash at Hermes'. The only way to get out of camp is getting a quest, which are banned.

The last thing he wants is to spend more time around his loose screws, but since Luke is a counselor, it means that he's probably one of the few people that will clarify things—and he does confirm a lot of it for him, talking about his father and his quest with a rather biting and resentful tone that makes him wonder how no one else around camp has called him out on it yet.

Also, apparently, the gods are murderous psychopaths, who decided to turn Thalia into a tree for protecting herself and her friends. Big yikes. And now they're fighting? He does recall that conversation he overheard Grover had with Chiron, about a winter solstice deadline, but he has no idea what he has to do with any of that. It doesn't help that Annabeth wants a quest, and thinks he's *the one*? What kind of crazy circus is this?

There's just something wrong with the place. It's welcoming, it's warm, and a part of him knows that he would come to love it if the cruel reminder that his mother is *gone* didn't hang over him, and if everyone didn't stare at him like *he's* the weirdo when they have kids like Annabeth, with her big head, and Luke, with his twisted smile, running around, as well as a dead girl turned tree.

Overall, it's not the worst day he's ever had.

But it does become his worst week.

He is laughably bad at everything. Wrestling, archery, metalworking, crafts—you name it, he'll probably come up with new situations to create safety rules for. As it is, he is only half decent at climbing the lava wall, and

surprisingly excellent at canoeing. He doesn't get a chance to go near the stables yet, which is too bad because he was hoping to catch more of Silena, and yeah, alright, he doesn't mind horses, and he's intrigued by the pegasi.

Even then, he doesn't mind camp. People look at him weird still, hoping to catch him doing something like he did to Clarisse, but Percy never feels that weird pull in his gut again. And even if he did... Silena's simple retelling of Thalia's story disturbs him. It's what he thinks the most of at night, other than his mother, and how he wishes she could see the strawberry fields and enjoy the beach with him. How he wishes he knew what she wanted to tell him.

He isn't sure he'd want to give people more reasons to judge him, if he does turn out to be like Thalia. He thinks it's unlikely—he's a loser. Percy doubts the child of one of the major gods of Olympus would turn out like him, abused by a stepfather that his mom tricked herself into needing, and unable to save her. He ignores that new memory of his father, lingering in the back of his mind.

He doesn't want that.

Thankfully, he's saved by his own thoughts by Silena, who finds him shortly after lunch on the third day, by the lake—preparing his canoe. He's pretty sure he is going to get a nickname because of it, to be honest, and he wouldn't mind it if it gets them off his back. He heard Annabeth muttering about the possibility of him being the kid of a minor water god, and even if that meant he'd never be claimed—seriously, what's up with that system? It just makes absent parents even more absent—Percy would settle for that.

“Mind if I join?” Silena asks, though the way she starts helping him with the canoe and steps on it as soon as it's ready leaves no room for argument. Percy hears giggles, both from the naiads and some campers lingering about, and Silena rolls her eyes. “Don't mind them, they do that to me and my siblings all the time. We can't talk to anyone without seeing stuff like that.”

“That seems a little unfair,” Percy says, sitting in the canoe, and grabbing the rows. Silena goes to grab the other pair, but the canoe is already leaving

the beach with barely any effort from his part. She raises her eyebrows and shoots him a look—which, fair, he’s been experimenting. No need to call him out. “Although, a lot of your siblings do seem to be...”

“Superficial?” Silena asks, but she doesn’t seem offended. Percy guesses she’s heard worse. “I suppose. Not all of us are like that, and most of the rest just... let people believe what they want. It’s better for us that way. Children of Aphrodite are peacemakers, deal breakers, witnesses, and long-distance fighters. Sorcerers, even.”

“I never thought about it like that.” Percy nods. “It makes sense. What doesn’t make sense to me, though, is—”

“Luke?” Silena finishes, pursing her lips. “Everyone loves him. But that’s because they don’t know him. Not the real him. If a child of Aphrodite can’t see through a façade, then no one can.”

“And you do, then?”

Silena stares at the water in silence for a few seconds, and then clears her throat. “Luke is angry a lot, which I get. The gods are... not nice. They can be unfair. But they’re gods, not humans. Luke is just like me and you, but there’s something wrong with him.”

Percy looks at her, the way her blue eyes reflect the color of water. When he met her, her hair had been dark, but now it’s blonde. He wonders if that’s something she changes a lot, to go with the image people have of her cabin, or if she just likes that.

“You have history with him,” Percy concludes, to which she nods. He decides to ask a question that’s been bothering him. “So... were you and Luke part of the demigods that came with that Thalia?”

Silena snaps her eyes at him and snorts. “Me? No, you only got that half-right. My father sent me here when I was young, and while I have a lot of abilities, I’m nowhere near as powerful as some of the other kids here, or even in my own cabin. I didn’t attract monsters.”

“Must be nice,” Percy says, trying to lighten the mood, and Silena forces a smile. “But Luke was? Who was the other kid, then? And the satyr?”

“I think you already have an idea,” Silena sighs, and looks down at her lap, frowning. When she looks back up, her eyes are hard, but not shut down like Annabeth’s. She looks strong without being distrustful. “It’s not something that’s evident, but I’ve noticed you’re observant, and quick to take hints. It’s a good skill to have.”

Percy doesn’t think he’s any of that, but he’s not gonna deny it just yet. “Annabeth? She seems... like she needs a quest real bad, and she’ll take any excuse. Like she wants to make up for something.”

“Yes,” Silena nods. “I... I was around her age, back then, just a little older. She was seven. I saw Thalia turn into a tree with my own eyes, and how it hurt her. Grover was beyond himself, and I don’t think he’s over it. I wanted to help, but Luke was there.”

“Luke,” Percy feels a cold sensation down his back. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

“He shouldn’t be left alone in rooms with people. Especially young people,” Silena crosses her arms, frowning. She’s starting to look angry. “I had a crush on him, for a bit—everyone at camp does at some point. He noticed, and he’s never let it go. Trying to charm me into whatever plots he has, typical Hermes kids. He’s a good liar, but not a good actor. When I get too dry with him, he goes after my siblings.”

Percy blinks. “That’s harassment.”

“A lot of that stuff goes unnoticed here. Have you noticed how he leads Annabeth on?” Silena shivers. “It gives me the creeps. I tried to tell Chiron about it once, and he’s kept an eye on Luke since, especially since he’s been so angry since his failed quest, but he’s stealthy. Chiron thinks he has an attitude problem because of his daddy issues, but I think he’s nuts.”

“I don’t like how he talks to me,” Percy clenches his jaw, but he forces himself to relax. Smelly Gabe is all the way in their apartment, probably

stinking up the place, relishing in their disappearance. “I’ve dealt with enough creeps to know you’re right. He has something twisted up in his head.”

“Be careful around him,” Silena sighs, shaking her head. As she does, her hair turns a darker blonde. Well, that answers that. “Don’t lower your guard. He would probably be an alright guy if he didn’t have such a big head.”

“Somehow, I doubt it,” Percy frowns. “I have sword practice with him later.”

“Well, make sure to kick his ass for me,” Silena grins, throwing him a wink, and Percy finds himself smiling, easier than it’s been since he arrived. There’s no way he’s going to do that on his first day, or even ever, but he appreciates the sentiment. “Do you know why I approached you on the first day?”

“I assumed because you’re nice?”

“No,” Silena rolls her eyes with a smile. “I mean, I *am*. But it’s because, well, Annabeth has a point. Your arrival is really weird. I guess we’ll see, but I knew that in between Annabeth and Luke, they’d make you question your place here more than anyone. And I just don’t want Luke gaining more followers, to be honest.”

“Fair,” Percy nods—it was not exactly out of the goodness of her heart, but it was certainly better than Annabeth deeming him her ticket out of the camp, and Luke being *too* friendly. “Honestly, you’ve been more helpful than anyone here.”

“I always am,” Silena flicks her hair back, and then throws him a *look*. “You do realize the boat has been canoeing itself for the last five minutes?”

“Oh, crap.” Percy moves his arms, feeling his face flush—hopefully, no one else at camp noticed. “That’s normal, right?”

“Sure,” Silena plays along. “Just the naiads playing a prank.”



Percy is starting to like this girl.

Sword fighting classes are very awkward. After having a break and splashing his face with water, he's able to make Luke seem a little stupid on his insistence that a technique is hard, even with his unbalanced sword. But then Luke pushes him until he tires and he makes a fool of himself, so it doesn't matter.

He doesn't mean to, but Percy spends more time out of Cabin Eleven than he probably should for someone that just arrived, finding excuses to hang out with Silena, be it Pegasus riding or canoeing. He stopped asking his father to claim him with his offerings, instead being insistent that he's fine, as if to delete his previous requests, because he could get used to this: to the crushing pressure on his lungs when he remembers his mom, to sleeping in a sleeping bag in an oversaturated cabin, to hanging out with Silena and trying to get Annabeth to—unfortunately for him—spend more time away from Luke.

Unfortunately, Friday arrives. The day starts off well; Grover gives him more context on the gods, and on the Big Three kids ban, explaining why they make the gods themselves nervous, and why Thalia was persecuted with such hardness. He also gave him an idea—a bad one, a stupid one, but Percy has only ever known one good thing in his life, and he isn't quite sure he's willing to let go of it. He'd do anything for his mom.

Then, Capture the Flag happens, and all his aspirations of leading a completely average summer at this demigod camp, grieving his mother, wishing to look for her, and passing under the radar, come crashing down.

It's all Annabeth's fault. She set him up as bait, by himself, knowing Clarisse would find him, and *oh*, did that make him angry. He wasn't able to defend himself against her spear *and* two more ugly Ares brats, not with the shield weighing him down and the unbalanced sword—being electrocuted *hurts*, it's probably as bad if not worse than Gabe's burns.

But then he was pushed into a creek, and something snapped. He doesn't recall most of it, a pull in his gut calling to him; the *water* calling to him and revitalizing his body. He doesn't properly remember making the water

move, dragging Clarisse's siblings into the creek and away from them as he approached her, sword in hand and shield forgotten. She looked spooked under her helmet, called his name, but Percy could only think of how angry he was: at her, at Annabeth, at this stupid judgmental camp, at gods that can't bother to even claim or call their kids, who turn their own children into plants as punishment for wanting to *live*.

He breaks Clarisse's spear in half, and water comes crashing against her—knocking her into a tree hard enough that she almost passes out cold, taking a second to sit up with a grunt. She looks murderous, but cautious, and before Percy can approach her—to do what, he doesn't know—Annabeth calls his name.

“Percy!” She screams, and she sounds half-panicked. “Stop it right now, before they—!”

She's too late; yelling breaks out through the sidelines, and Luke comes running, the enemy flag in his hands. Clarisse lets out a curse that Percy doesn't care about repeating right now, and suddenly he snaps out of his stupor, his body still thrumming with energy. He registers their victory, and Clarisse's unconscious siblings face-up in the creek. He has a feeling he wasn't the one to turn them.

As the Ares banner turns into Athena's, Annabeth appears out of thin air next to him, grabbing his elbow in an iron grip. “You absolute fool—!”

“Excuse me?” Percy snaps, and then points at Clarisse. “You used me as bait! What were you hoping for, for me to get crushed?!”

“I was right here to support you in case it went wrong!” Annabeth raises her voice, ignoring as the clearing fills with their fellow campers. Chiron breaks through the crowds, approaching them at full speed, but neither of them bother to pay attention to that. “Turns out it was a good call, because you almost drowned those kids!”

Percy blanches, but his fury doesn't back down. “I *didn't*—”

“Don't play dumb, Percy—”

“I saw it,” Clarisse cracks out, coughing. Percy feels cold at the realization that she’s clearing water out of her lungs. “He did it. Chiron, he used the water—”

“That’s enough!” Chiron snaps, looking between the three of them. “Let’s all calm down. Emotions are running high, and adrenaline can often blind us.”

“Are you kidding?!” Clarisse stomps her feet like a little kid. “What are you defending him for? It’s obvious who his dad is, and we’re all doomed because of it!”

Chiron opens his mouth, but Percy hears it again—that low growl that disturbed him earlier during the game. He sees Chiron’s eyes widen, hears him screaming to get down and Annabeth gasping in horror, but it’s too late.

The hellhound jumps him, making him crash back into the creek. Teeth break through his armor and claws attack his chest, but he barely registers the pain and the blood over the rushing of water in his ears.

He didn’t mean to. He really didn’t. Maybe if he hadn’t done it, Chiron could have hidden him for longer, even on the face of his identity, even with the whole camp wanting to stab him in the back because of it.

But Percy reaches into that power, thrumming through his veins, and he isn’t sure what happens, but the hellhound lets out a wine—scrambles back, off him, as if suddenly hurt, and everyone is too shocked to shoot it dead before water is crashing out again, and it keeps going, and going, as Percy remains dry in the creek and coughs out mouthfuls of blood.

The hellhound is drowning, and Chiron finally snaps out of his shock, and puts it out of his misery. His wounds start healing. His energy slowly comes back, and he barely registers the light over his head, the faint green glow.

“Perseus,” Chiron calls, and Percy looks up at him through his tears—through the realization. Chiron is looking at him as if he’s already dead. “Rise, for your father.”

He stands. He is not tired.

“It is determined!” Chiron starts, and campers fall to their knees. As Percy looks around, he finds a mix of reactions: horror, fear, anger. The scent of panic cuts through the clearing like a knife. He finds Silena, among the crowds, and she looks like she might just start crying. “Earthshaker, Stormbringer, Father of Horses. Hail, Perseus Jackson, Son of the Sea God!”

Poseidon.

His father is Poseidon.

And the target on his back has never felt more purposeful.

## 2. Chapter 2

### Notes for the Chapter:

hello everyone! thank you so much for the support on the first chapter. i thought it would be fun when i first started this to spend a little more time at camp, dive deeper into percy's mind and relationships there, so i hope you enjoy this approach! i'm thinking that i'm going to update this fic every two weeks or so, give or take, so that's schedule so you know when to look out for updates.

have a happy reading!

Chiron's first order of business is to hand him off to the Apollo cabin for inspection.

"That was a hellhound from the Fields of Asphodel," he says, expression grim. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that someone must have let it in somehow, but Percy doesn't have enough in him to care. He'll wonder who wants to kill him later. "You appear fine, but you should still be checked out. Lee, if you'd be so kind..."

"No problem, Chiron," Lee Fletcher, who's the Cabin Seven counselor and a little younger than Luke, nods, and doesn't hesitate to grab Percy by the shoulder. A bunch of his siblings are standing off to the side, watching him like they might just point their arrows at him, but a scolding look from Lee makes them scatter. Off to bed like Chiron ordered. "It'll be fine, Percy's cool. Right?"

Lee looks at him with a tight smile, and Percy appreciates the effort, but he doesn't manage much more than a nod. "Sure."

He drags him away before anyone can say another word, leaving behind a clearing full of gawking demigods, including Annabeth muttering to herself about wretched luck and Clarisse staring at the two ends of her broken spear in silence. Lee heads straight to the infirmary, and wordlessly motions for Percy to sit on a cot.

"Well, there's not much armor to remove..." He mutters, seemingly ignoring how his shirt is practically ribbons, and how the skin underneath looks perfectly fine. He takes to poking at his head and arms, trying to find any bruises, but Percy isn't hurt at all. Eventually, Lee gives up and sighs. "Alright, kid, listen—"

"I can go," Percy suggests, and brings his fingers together over his lap, trying to swallow his nerves. His fear. "You can tell Chiron you gave me a band aid or something. I don't mind."

Lee's expression, usually laid-back and friendly, twists with awkwardness. "No, I don't think so. Hades, I'd rather keep you here overnight."

Percy frowns. "So you can be sure I won't try to escape camp or kill all of you in your sleep?"

Lee's mouth drops open. "Dude. *Rude*. I'm just saying, I think it'd be better than going back to cabin eleven. Chiron is probably preparing three as we speak, but do you really want to sleep there after all that?"

Oh. "Uh. You..."

"I'm *nice*," Lee chuckles, but then his expression falls again. "Listen, people here can be... *extreme*. None of them would hurt you, they're too scared of you for that—"

"That's reassuring."

"—but mostly, I think everyone is waiting for the other shoe to drop." Lee pauses, taking a deep breath. "I'm sure you've heard about Thalia by now?"

"The tree," Percy nods, stomach churning. "She protects others even now."

"It's her punishment," Lee says, though it sounds like he's convinced himself of it, and doesn't like it. "Some say she can feel and hear everything, but there's no way to actually know that. Anyways, the point is—as far as camp knows, the only reason you're still alive is because you haven't done anything... punishable. And they're distracted."

Percy blinks at Lee, and he raises his eyebrows, tilting his head. Finally, it clicks. "The gods are fighting right now, aren't they?"

"Yes. Over something being missing," Lee rolls his eyes, trying to make light of it, but he looks too nervous. "And now your father claimed you, though he did wait until the last possible moment. The timing is... interesting."

"Wait," Percy brings a hand up, pointing at himself. "Are they going to get me involved?"

"You'd make a nice escape goat!" Lee exclaims with a wince, and Percy can't decide whether he wants to punch him or agree with him for that. "I don't think you would have been claimed otherwise. It's as good of an excuse as any to, well... get rid of you."

Percy feels like ice has been dropped down the back of his neck, and stares as Lee brings his hands up in a placating gesture, a hand falling on his shoulder to offer reassurance. It's a gesture foreign to him other than from his mom, and just the thought of it makes his eyes a little wet.

"Listen, Percy, you might get a quest," Lee shrugs. A rock drops to the bottom of Percy's stomach. "I'm sure Chiron will explain, but I'm not sure the gods will let you live without proving your loyalty anyways. I thought you might want a warning— healing is not just about the body. It's about the mind, too. You have to keep your head above the water."

Still reeling, Percy shakes his head. "My loyalty?"

"To Olympus," Lee throws a nervous look around the room, as if someone might be listening in. Honestly, Percy wouldn't be surprised if Annabeth were using that disappearing trick of hers. "Big Three children... a dangerous bunch. They only want them as weapons or loyal dogs. If they step out of line, like Thalia—"

"Thalia didn't step out of line," Percy cuts in, frowning. People's attitude about this bothers him. "I know things work differently in this world, but she was just trying to live. She protected three other people."

"And she almost killed one of Lord Hades' and Lady Persephone daughters in the process," Lee visibly swallows. "That's scary. You weren't there to see it, but a lot of us were. The way she died... it wasn't pretty. Thalia seemed like she was a cool kid. You seem like you're a cool kid. I don't think any of us actually want you to end up like her. But you *might*, and that is terrifying."

Percy doesn't answer right away. He stares at Lee's apprehensive expression, and a lot of bits of information start clicking inside his head. The gods have a tight leash on their children; they expect obedience and loyalty, gratefulness even, considering the obligatory offerings at meals. They put fear in them by punishing whoever they deem fit, and do whatever they can to avoid birthing demigods strong enough to face them.

Demigods like him and Thalia. Percy gets it now. "You aren't afraid of me. You're afraid of *them*. And *they* fear *us*."

"You could say that," Lee concedes, shifting his weight. He looks around again, and then his expression shuts down for a second, only for a relieved sigh to leave him, his shoulders dropping. "Gods, Silena—you could just knock."

Percy turns, but the room is empty—hold on, why is that corner blurry?

"I've been practicing stealth magic and Mist manipulation together," Silena's voice says, and then, much like Annabeth, she materializes out of thin air, her image taking a second to clear before his eyes. Percy blinks as she smiles at Lee. "You're too perceptive for my skill still."

"My dad is Apollo," Lee scoffs, shaking his head, and then looks back at Percy. "I should get Chiron. I'll tell him you have a concussion, so you better spend the night here. You did get what I was trying to tell you, though?"

Percy nods, slowly. "Yeah... thank you, I guess. I'll take care."

Lee pats his arm with a smile. "You're one of us. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. I'll see you."



He turns and jogs out of the room, just as Silena sits beside him on the cot, her expression uncharacteristically shy. "Are you okay?"

No one's asked Percy that in a while. Not with her softness. He feels compelled to answer with honesty. "I think I'm still in shock."

"I see," Silena nods, looking down at her lap as he bites her lip. "It's silly, but a part of me was still hoping you'd be my brother."

Percy feels a knot form in his throat. "Yeah? Even with all the water stuff?"

"Aphrodite is a minor sea goddess. Lots of people don't know that. I guess I thought you could be an odd case— and you certainly have the looks, for a twelve-year-old, if a little dorky," Silena elbows him with a grin, and Percy chuckles, despite the compliment making his ears red and his eyes even more damp. That would've been nice. "It could've been fun."

"My mom would have a lot to explain," Percy forces out a smile, but it's wobbly. Silena's hand squeezes his shoulder in reassurance, and it helps him blink out the tears, making him comfortable enough to speak up. "Is it... is it bad that I'm scared of *him*?"

Silena hums, her voice as soft as ever. "I think it's only logical, to be honest. I'm proud of who my mother is... but Aphrodite has as much cruelty in her heart as she does love. All the gods do."

"What do I do?" Percy shuts his eyes, trying to keep the tears at bay. Gabe always told him crying is for the weak— but Silena pulls him in, wrapping an arm around his shoulders, mindful of his personal space but still offering support. If a few tears slip out...well, she doesn't seem to judge. "What— what am I supposed to do?"

"Don't let them break you, Percy," Silena says. He blinks his eyes open and meets a scowl, but it's not directed at him. "You can bend, like some of us do, but don't let them break you like they did Thalia. You can play their game and survive. It'll be hard... but it's the best shot we all got to live. Don't give them the satisfaction."

"I want my mom back," Percy breathes out. "That's all I want."

"I don't know if that's possible, Percy. But prove to them that you won't back down, and, I..." Silena trails off, unsure, but she's trying. She's trying her best— just like the rest of them. For the first time since he arrived, he realizes that every kid in here is just as unsure about their future as he is. They're all the same. They're supposed to work together, not bully each other or boss everyone around like Clarisse and Annabeth do. "We'll figure something out. I'll help you. I promise—"

"You don't have to promise anything," Percy forces out, clearing his throat. "I believe you."

Before Silena can say anything else, Percy hears the sound of hooves over wood, and Chiron appears. He looks between the two of them, pausing, but finally settles on Percy. His expression softens, and Percy sees it again, that concerned, careful look from Mr. Brunner. It's so much worse now, with context for it.

"I see Miss Beauregard has been keeping you company," Chiron nods his head at Silena, who shrugs. Chiron sighs. "I had hope, after you arrived... Percy, you must forgive me for my lack of foresight. I should've warned you something like this could happen, and what the repercussions could be, and done my best to lighten the news. What we want often blinds us from what we have to do."

Something about his words seems daunting. "I get it. It's not like you can play favorites. I had to make my own rep around here."

Chiron doesn't quite seem to like his phrasing, but he agrees, in the end. "I suppose that's one way to put it, Percy. Luke was kind enough to help me move your things to cabin three, so the place will be ready when Lee deems you well-enough to go. I must ask, is there anything else I can do for you tonight?"

The petty part of him wants to ask him if there's any way for him to actually get his mom back, but he knows that isn't fair, and Chiron, despite appearances, isn't the one in charge. Mr. D is, and judging by his

impression of him, Percy doesn't think that he'd allow him to pursue his wishes, even if he had Chiron's support.

So, he forces a smile, and points at Silena. "Can she sit at my table?"

Chiron's lips twitch with amusement, and Silena brings a hand up to her lips, covering a smile. "I'll see what I can do."

Naturally, things only go downhill from here. The next morning when he wakes up, Lee already has his breakfast picked for him, and checks him over again as he eats. He seems impressed by the time he's done.

"Water," he's mumbling, as he digs his whole arm into the lollipop vase to get Percy the blue one at the bottom. It's the only one left, and it only took a bit of coaxing to get him to get it for him. "If only I could do that with sunlight..."

"That sucks for sunburns," Percy points out. "But I guess you'd have a nice tan."

Lee frowns. "Isn't my tan already nice?"

It is, much more so than Luke's, even, but Percy doesn't feel comfortable admitting to that. It's the kinda stuff that Gabe would have punched his lights out for. "Just give me my candy."

Everything is fine while he's still inside the infirmary. Lee is good company, and the other medics—his siblings—that he introduces him to are, if reluctant at first, just as nice, once Percy proves to be...normal. By demigod standards, at least.

No, the problem starts the second he sets a foot outside.

Over the last week, Percy's gotten used to perfect weather; camp is never too humid or too dry, the sky is always a perfect blue, with a perfect amount of shade. The sun is never too hot, and the wind is never too cold. It's like paradise. Or, it was: in the five minutes it takes him to walk up to meet

Chiron at the Big House from the infirmary, the sky darkens, clouds cover the coast, and rain starts pouring.

Lee stares at the sky, crestfallen. “Oh, dad is going to be pissed. The sun was perfect today.”

The sun is perfect every day, so Percy doesn’t know what he’s talking about, but he figures it must be a *thing*. He’s noticed lots of kids here have *things* that are somehow related to their parents. “I don’t think the gods are happy about my dad claiming me.”

“No one is,” Chiron speaks up, and winces when Percy sends him an incredulous look. “My apologies— I just meant, making the obvious official can sometimes do more harm than good.”

“That’s not reassuring at all,” Lee mumbles, and Percy holds back a snort. Yeah, no joke.

“Where’s Mr. D?” Percy asks, noticing that the porch is empty; the poker table has its chair propped up on top of it, and there’s no sign of any cards. “I was mentally preparing myself to be turned into a shrub, so this is kind of disappointing.”

Chiron looks pained. “A council meeting was summoned to discuss... urgent matters. He should be back by the end of the week, if not sooner.”

Lee throws Percy a look, like he’s double-checking that Percy understood those urgent matters are him. He decides to focus on Chiron, but he’s thankful for the moral support. “What am I supposed to do until then?”

“I suggest acclimating yourself to your environment once more,” Chiron raises an eyebrow at Lee that only goes up higher when Silena, who was headed for the stables, catches sight of them and starts power-walking at them. Grover pops out from the woods, in much the same fashion, and—oh, not Annabeth, too. “I suspect it won’t be as hard as it could be. Perhaps you should start at your cabin?”

Percy recalls that Luke helped move his stuff, and while he doesn't take him for the prankster type, something about it irks him. He changes the subject "Will my lessons change?"

"You might want to spend more time with the naiads," Chiron starts, and then seems to think better of it, when he glances out at the sky again. "Or, maybe don't push your powers. Either way, Miss Beauregard can probably help you figure some things out."

"Hi, good morning," Silena breaks in, with Grover and Annabeth on her heels. Unlike them, there isn't a single drop of water on her. "I will. Can I sit with him, then?"

Chiron hums, smiling, and then turns to Lee. "You should lead the archery lessons today, my boy. I'm afraid I'll be a little preoccupied with other business, in the midst of our camp director handling the weather. We'll hope this rain lets up before lunch..."

He turns and walks into the Big House, leaving the five of them staring after his tail. Grover, perhaps sensing the awkward silence that none of them are too eager to break, holds out a zip lock bag with bits of tin cans. "Anyone else hungry?"

Lee whistles. "You know what, I think I'm gonna get my cabin an early breakfast. Silena, Annabeth, what do you think?"

"I was hoping to have a chat with Percy," Silena shifts her weight, eyes shifting to Annabeth. "If I'm allowed to, I guess."

"I was hoping to do the same. In private," Annabeth scowls at them. Grover starts chewing on a piece of aluminum. "I guess Percy will have to decide."

"Decide?" He asks, baffled. Silena and Annabeth just stare at him in expectation, and Lee shrugs like *tough luck, buddy!* before leaving. Grover politely avoids his gaze. "This is stupid, you know? Why can't we just... have a conversation?"

Annabeth and Silena eye each other like this is some sort of chess game, and they both think the other is cheating. It is Annabeth who speaks up. “Some information is for your ears only.”

Percy rolls his eyes. “Right, you do realize that you owe me after setting me up as bait?”

“It was a plan that worked!” Annabeth protests, her face flushing. Grover’s chewing becomes a little loud.

“It sure worked out for me!” Percy shoots back, crossing his arms. “Maybe if you *hadn’t* used me without telling me, I wouldn’t have been claimed at all!”

As if to mark his words, the rain pours harder, and the wind picks up. It feels like there should be thundering with it, but there’s barely a flash of light, no sound. Percy catches the scent of sea water, perhaps coming off the beach, and it makes him uneasy.

Annabeth swallows, staring at him with wide eyes— either because she has no comeback, or because she can’t put her pride down enough to admit she did something wrong out loud and apologize. Either way, Silena steps in between them, frowning.

“You two need to calm down,” she says, her voice soft, yet perfectly clear over the sound of the rain hitting the ground. It always seems to do that, claiming people’s attention. Percy doesn’t envy it. “Tensions are already high enough between the gods; we don’t need to create division at camp, too. How about this? We take our cabins to breakfast, and then we sit with Percy. Chiron’s lack of answer is as good as permission, and I’m sure he won’t mind looking away while Mr. D isn’t around. Is that okay?”

Percy clenches his jaw. “Fine. But I already ate.”

“Lee’s a dawn bug,” Annabeth mumbles, and Percy winces— he knows. He was up with the sun thanks to him. “Fine, Beauregard. I’ll take your deal. But if you listen to something you don’t like, or decide to spread the word about it, then—”

“I can keep a secret,” Silena smiles, a little tense, but nonetheless real. “You have nothing to worry about.”

“Great!” Grover breaks in, patting Percy on the back. “So, maybe you should check out your cabin while they eat?”

Percy already saw Cabin Three when he arrived, and he wasn’t thrilled. Does the place look fantastic, like a second home? Yes, and now it makes sense why. Did it make him uneasy? Also yes. He can’t shake off the feeling that comes with the thought of his father, that casually resurfacing memory of cold eyes and a frown. He wonders what his father actually thinks of him, considering it seems like the gods just want to keep them in line and avoid trouble. What was the point of letting him grow up, then? Why not just... end it?

Percy has been told he’s nothing but trouble since he was born, by teachers and Gabe alike. He’d always believed it, but now, it’s about ten times worse.

He figures he might as well get used to the place, so he lets Grover lead him, bracing himself on the steps before opening the door. The smell of sea water fills his lungs, both comforting and overbearing; like his parentage is breathing down his neck. As he runs his eyes over the empty bed bunks, dusty and lifeless, he feels like he’s being watched, and a sadness overtakes him.

Camp is turning out to be just like spending summer with Gabe—he just happened to go from a cage to a prison, and it’s hard not to despair over that. It would be easier, if he had his mom with him. If he at least knew she was safe. But she’s gone.

“Percy,” Grover calls, setting a hand over his shoulder, and Percy takes a deep breath, forcing himself to relax before turning his head to look at him. “I know... I know it’s not what you expected. It’s not what I promised, exactly, and I’m... I’m really sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Percy shakes his head, forcing the knot in his throat down. “It’s alright, Grover. It’s... you did what you could. You’re still my best friend. Nothing

could change that.”

Grover snuffles, his expression twisting like he might just protest his words, but in the end, he just nods. “Okay. I, uh, do you at least like... the food?”

“The food is great,” Percy can’t help but let out a snort. “Don’t worry. I’ll be fine. Besides, if I... if I get a quest...”

“I’ll be with you every step. I promise.” Grover sighs, holding back a shiver. “It’s a scary idea, but it’s not out of the question. But I’ll help you. I’ll make it up to you.”

“Cool,” Percy fist bumps his arm, and then turns to walk out of the cabin. “C’mon, this place is giving me the creeps.”

“Right, I don’t think we should let Silena and Annabeth wait. That could be explosive.” Grover mutters under his breath. At Percy’s questioning look, he blushes. “Um, you know Annabeth and Luke, and Silena and Luke—”

“Ugh,” Percy scrunches up his nose. Luke. That’s *yet another thing*. “I know. Let’s go, or I’ll be dead before Mr. D gets back to kill me.”

Grover doesn't seem to find the humor in his death jokes, and he can't blame him. Percy isn't sure he sees it either.

Silena and Annabeth are sitting at table three already, when he arrives. He ignores the whispers and looks thrown his way, clenching his jaw and walking at a completely normal pace. It's like day one again, when everyone was on and on about the Minotaur, and the Big Three material. Guess they know now.

He sits across from both of the girls, and Grover lingers before thinking better of it and heading to the head table. Good for him, honestly.

"So," Percy looks at them, and he's glad that at least they don't look like they've been fighting. He doesn't know what's worse though, the idea of them arguing, or that they were just sitting in awkward silence together. "Where do you... want to start?"



"I'll go first," Annabeth announces, and Percy sees Silena hiding a smile. Seems this was agreed upon. "You need to see the Oracle."

Percy's expression falls. "Uh, what?"

"You know something about what's going on with the gods, don't you?" Annabeth presses. "You told me while you were unconscious, when you got here."

"Oh," Percy looks at Silena for support, but she just shrugs. Alright then. "Er, something about the solstice. A deadline. And I only heard this here, but something was stolen?"

"Alright, and now Lord Poseidon claimed you," Annabeth nods, but he isn't following her line of thought at all. "They're probably going to blame *you*. Or, make you recover what's missing."

"Sure," Percy agrees— suddenly, he's thankful for Lee's warning, but he frowns as he thinks about the logic of the gods thinking a twelve-year-old could steal something from them. Seems they really just want him dead. "What's that gotta do with an Oracle?"

"You can't go on a quest without a prophecy," Silena chimes in. "The Oracle gives them out. We keep it in the attic."

"Oh," Percy thinks to the figure he saw move in the window. Chiron's answer to his question about it. "Oh, hell no."

Annabeth rolls her eyes. "I don't know what you've heard, but it's not that bad. The last holder just...well, the Oracle never changed bodies, and no one knows why. But it's okay."

"You're telling me you have a dead body upstairs?" Percy shivers. She might be nonchalant about it, but she didn't see it *move*. "You people are insane."

"Well, you better get used to it," Silena smiles, like they're talking about chocolate and rainbows. "We're *all* a little crazy. Besides, I agree with

Annabeth."

"You do?" Percy and Annabeth ask in unison, though her tone is much more incredulous.

Silena shrugs. "The Oracle can give you answers, even if they aren't what you want to hear. I thought... I thought you could use it to get an idea about your mom, but I suppose, if you might get a quest anyways... why not?"

"Great. So I basically avoided having this conversation twice," Percy glances between the two of them, and then runs a hand over his face in frustration. "So I'm just supposed to stay put until I either get killed or get a quest."

Silena winces, and even Annabeth seems sympathetic about it. "Yeah, pretty much."

"I also thought I could help you, uh, with the thing Chiron said about your powers?" Silena leans her elbows on the table, lowering her voice. "The other kids might get nervous about it, but it'll be alright. Aphrodite has a lot of... passive powers that can help me keep things over control, in case something happens."

Percy shoots her a skeptical look. "Meaning?"

"She's talking about charmspeak," Annabeth provides. She doesn't seem too happy about it. "It's part of Lady Aphrodite's magic that usually gets passed down to their children. Like illusions, shape shifting, pheromone control, emotional manipulation, love curses—"

"Charmspeak is more common than all that, and it's just being able to... order people around," Silena cuts in, though she doesn't seem *too* offended. Annabeth seems rather clinical about it, and Percy can imagine, with a set list like that, that Silena's gotten a lot of nastier hits from other people. "Usually we just get some minor shape shifting, and the love curses—natural resistance to magic, and magical affinity. I'm decent at it."

"Cool," Percy says, very slowly. Then, he nods. "Sure. Okay. Is this the part where I train?"

"You'll need to put double the effort you were putting in before yesterday," Annabeth clears her throat. Her eyes look particularly piercing. "If you wanna live, that is. And I mean that in *all* your lessons."

"I'm doing the homework," Percy grumbles, and Silena chuckles. Percy fights back a smile. "This summer camp sucks, you know."

"You're the one that made it rain," Silena winks, and Percy groans. He has a feeling the rain is not going to stop all week, and naturally, it'll be his fault. For being *born*.

If Percy felt like a sore thumb sticking out before, it's only worse now that he's isolated. Silena and Annabeth leave him for the rest of breakfast, not wanting to test how long Chiron is willing to ignore *two* rule breakers, so he just lingers there, staring at the rain falling over the fields, until breakfast is over.

Turns out rain kills a lot of activities. The lava wall is out of the question, the archery ring is flooded, and the pegasi usually avoid letting people ride them during godly storms like these. According to Silena, if the wrong kid gets on the horse, they might just get blasted out of the sky—she means him, she really does—so he doesn't even get to meet those flying horses yet.

And, as luck will have it, the rain doesn't stop before lunch. Or dinner. Or during the night, when Percy has that nightmare again, of his father staring at him, of a snake crawling into his crib as he watches, judging.

It sucks hard, and the fact that half the camp has to cram in the fighting arena while the other half sticks to doing rain-friendly activities (like learning to run away on the mud) means that he simultaneously doesn't get a break for himself, while having too much time to kill.

Also, he's starting to think people resent him for getting claimed, on top of being too skittish to be around him. One night, after getting absolutely destroyed by Clarisse at wrestling *again*—she's been extra mad because of

her spear—he comes back to his cabin only to find a newspaper reporting on his and his mother's disappearance, and how heartbroken Smelly Gabe is over it—blaming him without anything holding him back.

"I'm gonna kill whoever did that," Percy mumbles to Silena over breakfast the next morning, which they're having outside, by the lake. Percy discovered after last Friday that he doesn't get wet unless he wants to, and apparently Silena has a spell to repel rain—or a potion, something like that. He doesn't understand much of it, but at least it means that they get a little privacy *and* that they get to be dry. "I'm serious."

"I don't doubt you could," Silena raises her eyebrows. "But maybe don't, yet. Someone is just trying to play a bad prank. Must be someone from the Hermes cabin that hasn't gotten claimed, or that doesn't know what being funny is."

"It's not my fault it even happened. So they wanna get claimed by one of the Big Three, or what? Because I would gladly trade places," Percy breaks off a piece of his sandwich, and tries to offer it to a nearby naiad, but she just giggles and swims away. He frowns. "What do they eat?"

"Fish," Silena answers easily—either clueless or uncaring of Percy's horror at it. She continues. "And you don't mean that, Percy. I know it's awful, but... at least you know. Imagine recognizing yourself in one of the other cabins and never being claimed— or in none, but knowing whoever your parent is isn't important enough for their child to get their own place."

Percy sighs. She's right. While the thought of his father disturbs him, at least he wouldn't have to wonder who it is that is making him uneasy in that regard. No looking over his shoulder— just looking at the ocean, at his cabin, at his table in the pavilion.

"This all sucks," he concludes, and then abandons his sandwich. "I'm going for a swim, see if I can get the naiads to talk to me or something. You coming?"

Silena looks like she's holding back laughter. "No, thank you. I can't breathe underwater, and I don't quite remember the spell for that."

"I never said I could breathe underwater—wait," Percy squints, his whole life refocusing. His eyes widen. "Huh."

"I knew I could help you figure your powers out," Silena laughs, and then pushes him into the water—she is right. He can breathe. It's... disturbing. But also kinda cool.

The naiads keep refusing to be helpful, so it's up to Silena to inspire him to tap into his powers. He wouldn't admit it, but they scare him. The Ares campers that were with Clarisse on Friday weren't actually in any danger of drowning—according to Chiron, the water nymph of that creek was a young, tiny thing, and didn't have the power to stop him controlling her nor the viciousness to do much to them, which only made him feel worse—but the hellhound was another thing entirely.

Unlike the Minotaur, it didn't fade into dust. The Apollo cabin had taken it into the Big House for Chiron to confirm its origins, and a dissection seemingly took place. Annabeth wasn't willing to share much on it, probably sensing his unease, but she hesitantly revealed that, by the time Chiron shot it with his bow, the thing was already practically dead. Its ichor had been too liquid and its lungs filled with water.

Percy's always had anger issues. He went to anger management for a reason, though that never did him much good, but thinking that he has that kind of violence in him makes his stomach churn. Still, both Annabeth and Silena insist that he needs to be able to defend himself, if push comes to shove. And he has to admit they're right.

So, as his sword-lessons with Luke become one-on-one because everyone that isn't Clarisse is too scared to spar with him, and Annabeth keeps drilling myths into his head, he also meets up with Silena and Grover to try and figure out what he can do. Breathing underwater and staying dry are givens, after they make him spend almost a whole afternoon chasing after naiads. He runs across a bank of fish once, which is how he discovers he can understand sea life—and that fish are *extremely* rude if you interrupt their swimming-at-a-beat sessions—but the most interesting discovery comes during a campfire at night, on accident.

Percy isn't big on singing. Not because he's bad at it, since his mom always insisted that she loved listening to him, but there's a certain confidence that comes with it that he simply doesn't have. Silena and her siblings have it, harmonizing beautifully with the Apollo cabin during more elaborate songs—and the Apollo cabin puts everyone on the radio to shame, as far as Percy is concerned—but he's never been big on public performances. The times they made him do school plays, Percy almost always got himself into detention to avoid it.

Taking this into account, his surprise is quite big when, while he's singing along under his breath and melting a s'more, Lee stops dead in the middle of a chord on his guitar to stare at him. Percy doesn't realize at first, too sleepy, comfortable, and filled with food, still humming under his breath, until Silena elbows him, and he looks up to find half the Apollo cabin staring at him, too, in dead silence.

Percy looks around and double checks that everyone else is as confused, and also that no one is inexplicably drowning, before frowning up at them. "What?"

Lee blinks, eyes widening, and he seems to realize that he just made all the campers awkward. He clears his throat, looking around, and then shoots a smile at them all. "Sorry, I just remembered something. Where were we?"

His siblings stare at him like he's gone nuts, which he's inclined to agree with, but the campfire continues and everyone seems to shrug it off—claiming it's another of those child-of-Apollo *things*; apparently, some of them get glimpses into the future or the past at random, though the way Silena keeps side-eyeing him makes him think that Lee isn't one of them.

He doesn't get an explanation until the next morning, when Lee slides next to him, keeping his eyes on Chiron, who is resolutely *not* looking at them. "Hey there, Percy."

Percy swallows his mouthful of waffles and frowns. "What's up with you?"

"I wanted to have a chat with you," Lee whispers, which—okay, whatever. He seems to be a little dramatic sometimes. "About last night at the

campfire.”

“Oh, you mean when you reminded everyone I existed?” Percy asks, tone dry, and Lee’s only defense is a sheepish smile, his eyes twinkling with the sunlight. Honestly, he’s lucky he’s... nice. Yeah. Just nice. “What was that about?”

“I noticed something,” Lee says, his smile widening. “Something fun.”

“Something fun,” Percy repeats. He has a bad feeling about this.

“Meet me at the lake when you’re done here,” he winks, and goes back to his table like he was never there in the first place. Before Percy can take another bite of his waffle, Silena slides into the seat in front of him, and Percy thinks that it’s really nice that he’s making tons of friends before he’s inevitably turned into a plant. Yay.

“I’m coming with you,” she smiles, and then glances down at how he’s eating and scrunches up her nose. “Percy, you’re too pretty to have crumbs. Here, you can use my napkin, it’s enchanted to pick up anything—”

Oh, right, he should probably mention: Silena is a neat-freak. Well, according to Silena herself, she’s *diagnosed* with OCD, credit where it’s due, and he doesn’t judge, but the way she sees it in order to accept it and work with it is that she likes things to look orderly and pretty, and she has rituals that she follows religiously. This sometimes involves the people around her, from her siblings having to stand at a certain order in a line, to Percy’s sloppy table manners.

“Lena, you’re killing me,” Percy mumbles, but takes her enchanted napkin anyway. In a way, it reminds him of his mom; how she used to roll her eyes with a smile and ruffle his hair while playfully chastising him. “Do you have any idea what Lee is on about?”

“I do,” Silena shrugs, and her eyes shift from blue to green, similar to his. For a second, Percy imagines a parallel universe where they’re siblings, because when she looks like this, dark hair with green eyes and tanned skin,

they look like they're related. Only she's prettier, and nicer. "I'll keep the surprise, though."

The last thing Percy needs in his life is more surprises, and he's twelve. Ugh.

He drags his feet to the lake, Silena linking their arms together and practically skipping in her steps from how cheery she looks. The rain hasn't really let up—there's still a mild drizzle—but at least camp activity has mostly returned to normal, if everyone counting the days to when Mr. D comes down with the gods' verdict about him can be considered that.

Lee is kneeling at the edge of the canoe deck, talking to the naiads, when they find him. Percy frowns. "Do they speak to you?"

"Naiads like to sunbathe," Lee shrugs, shooting him a sympathetic look. "Actually, a lot of sea creatures like to sunbathe. They like my dad, so they sometimes talk to me. Mostly to flirt, though, but it can be useful."

Percy frowns harder. *He* likes to sunbathe, when he goes to Montauk with his mom. Does this mean he's a sea creature? Yikes. "What did you want to talk about?"

"I see Silena stuck her nose into this too," Lee snorts, raising his eyebrows at her. Silena shrugs, her smile a little too innocent. Percy's starting to question the kind of friendships he's making, but Lee brings up two earplugs, eyes twinkling. "Silena, do you think you might need a pair of these, or are you good?"

"I'm good," she giggles, and then sits down next to Lee, dragging Percy down with her and patting his arm. "I certainly hope you intend to wear them. Did you talk to the naiads about this?"

"Yep, everything is under control," Lee shoots another wink at Percy, who by now is way too used to not knowing what's going on to bother to ask. Lee raises an eyebrow, putting in his earplugs. "Now, Percy, can you sing for us?"



Percy stares. “Is this a joke?”

Silena chuckles, shaking her head. “Percy, just trust us, alright? Reach deep inside you, think of your favorite song, or your favorite melody, or just something that makes you feel really, really nice. I promise, it’ll be alright.”

Percy gazes between them, at their open, eager faces, and feels himself flushing. He’s never had the confidence for this sort of thing, but he finds it difficult to say no— especially when he *does* trust them. Percy’s been giving the camp a lot of crap since he arrived, judging everyone in general a little harshly, because their world—which is now his world, too—is unfair and dangerous and ripped his mom away from him.

But Silena and Lee haven’t been like that. They’ve been considerate and thoughtful. They’ve looked after him like older siblings would, and there’s also Grover, who tells him eagerly about his dreams of getting a searchers-license, and Annabeth, who he doesn’t really like but that he can respect in the sense that she wants to get things done. Luke... he’s a creep, but even then, he’s not the worse one out there.

Camp Half-Blood isn’t that bad. Not at all. And he’s starting to feel for the tired, dead-eyed campers living in the overcrowded Cabin Eleven, and Thalia’s tree keeps calling to him, her story resonating. A part of him wants to help them— the part that isn’t too busy grieving.

So, Percy gives in. He’s hesitant, as he starts, since singing without music is difficult and extremely awkward. But he pushes through it, even as his neck flushes, trying to think of nice things, like when Gabe wasn’t home and mom took a day off and they were able to blast *their* music and enjoy themselves, forgetting about their issues.

He sees the change in Lee’s expression almost instantly. His shoulders go slack, his smile becomes dreamy, and his eyelids flutter like he might just fall asleep. Percy stares, wondering what’s happening to him, but it doesn’t occur to him to stop singing.

In fact, now that he’s started, he doesn’t seem to be able to stop. His voice subconsciously grows in volume and he notices Silena jerk her hand out,

holding onto his shoulder, but he doesn't actually register it, fully focused on Lee.

Lee starts to sit up, looking down at the lake, and, within a few more seconds of singing, stops smiling, stands up, and jumps into the water.

The sound of his body breaking the surface and sinking doesn't even snap him out of his stupor.

Silena yelling in his ear, with the full power of her charmspeak, does. "Percy, *stop!*"

He snaps his mouth shut and energy leaves his body like a switch being turned off—he would've collapsed backwards into the lake, if not for Silena holding on to his arm and pulling him into her space instead, wrapping an arm around his shoulders and shushing him as he reorientates himself.

The horror and panic starts creeping in when he realizes that Lee is nowhere to be seen. "Silena, where...where is Lee?"

"Curse those naiads," Silena snaps, and lets go of him, allowing him to sit up on his own as she leans over the deck, looking down into the lake. Percy's body feels numb, exhausted, but his mind is running at a thousand miles per hour, panic choking his throat and moisture welling up in his eyes, the longer Lee remains unseen. "Stop scaring him, you mean dolls! That's enough! Don't make me come down there like last time, I got more glitter in my pockets!"

Curiously, Percy hears the murmur of voices, for the first time—but he's distracted from it by Lee resurfacing, taking a deep gulp of air, and shooting his arms out to find the edge of the deck. Before he can even process what he's doing, Percy ignores Silena's cry for him to stay put, and he jumps down, as well.

He grabs Lee and pulls him using the water to be able to handle his weight, towards the beach shore, heart racing in his ears. He makes sure to pull him face-up out of the water, his limbs shaking, and he ends up falling to his

knees beside him, staring at him as Lee sits up and blinks water out of his eyes.

Percy flinches when Lee reaches out a hand towards him, making him hesitate. He settles for taking a deep breath and resting his hand against the sand, in the space between them, sighing. “Percy, it’s okay. I’m alright. I knew this could happen, that’s why I talked to the naiads—”

“That wasn’t okay,” Percy chokes out, blinking tears out of his eyes. He barely notices Silena coming up behind him as he stares at Lee, taking out his earplugs, soaked from head to toe. “Nothing about that was okay—what... what even was that, I don’t—I don’t understand and I couldn’t stop —”

“Percy, look at me, okay?” Lee asks, his voice soft, and Percy meets his eyes, allowing him to set a hand on his shoulder as Silena sits beside them, not caring about her jeans getting dirty with wet sand. “Deep breaths, Percy, follow my lead— in and out, in and out, that’s it. It’s okay. You need to calm down so we can talk about what just happened.”

“Lee—” Percy protests, but his voice chokes him. He feels so tired, and his throat is raw. Silena hesitantly grabs one of his hands, soothing, but Percy can see that she’s also blinking tears out of her eyes. She was also scared. “I... I don’t... you almost...”

“I know, Percy, but I took precautions,” Lee frowns for a second, but he forces his expression to remain reassuring. “Those naiads just decided to toy with us. I knew they’d agreed too easily. But I was alright, I promise. I’m fine— I didn’t even get water in my mouth or nose.”

“But...” Percy shakes his head. “That doesn’t change what I did.”

“Percy,” Silena breaks in, her voice soft. She looks concerned, and it seems that she’s forgotten about reapplying her anti-rain charm, because her hair is starting to get wet from the drizzle. “What you just did was... similar to charmspeak. A form of it, you could say. A Siren’s Song is a really unique thing, and it’s not often that demigods get something like that, and ever rarer that it comes out that strong. And a power like that can be really scary;

a lot, and I mean a *lot* of my siblings don't use our mother's gifts because people see them as immoral. But they're still our gifts, Percy, what matters is how we use them."

"I almost drowned him!" Percy protests, clenching his hands into fists. Now that the terror is passing, he's starting to feel angry. Angry at himself, angry at the naiads, angry at them for taking this so lightly. "I think that's pretty immoral, Silena!"

Silena frowns, not even flinching at his tone. "We aren't born being able to control it, Percy. Like any skill, it needs honing and training, or it can run wild. It's hardly your fault—"

"I don't want it," Percy snaps, looking at Lee, avoiding Silena's kind, understanding eyes. "Any of this. It's— I'm too dangerous. Maybe, maybe we should tell Chiron to call Mr. D and get it over with—"

"Percy!" Silena shakes his shoulder, making him glare at her. "Don't say that! You think we're going to let you hand yourself over like that? It wasn't your fault— we should have taken it more seriously! When I was five, I almost made my dad buy out the whole stock of a toy store because I couldn't control my charmspeak, and the only thing that stopped me was that I got scared. That fear— it's good. If you're scared of it, then you would never hurt anyone, but you still need to practice control. That's how it works."

Her steel-strong tone makes his anger waver, and Lee sighs, making him focus on him. "When I was seven, I discovered I could make people talk in couplets, and curse them to tell the truth. The only reason I found out was because I cursed my teacher, and she ended up confessing, *through a couplet*, in the middle of a school assembly, that she was cheating on her husband, and also scamming her car insurance company."

"And when I turned ten," Silena breaks in, before Percy can process that. "My dad got married to this woman— she's alright, and she became my dad's business partner, but I still wanted my mom to get back with him back then, and one day I accidentally told her to not speak to him if she wasn't Aphrodite. It took me a week to get the charmspeak to leave off."

Lee whistles, cracking a smile. “I once broke all the windows in the house by practicing my singing.”

“I made a girl at my school cry because I kept changing my eye color without realizing and no one would believe her.”

“Styx, that’s effed up,” Lee chuckles, and then turns towards Percy. Heart beating fast, Percy stares back. “Do you get it now, buddy?”

Percy pushes past the wave of his feelings— of his anger and his fear, of his panic and his horror, and takes a deep, deep breath. For the first time since Montauk, the smell of sea-water doesn’t make him sick, and the weight of reality, of this being who he is, of this being who he’s *always* going to be, seems to finally settle in. No longer dragging him down, but rather shouldering it.

He’s going to have to learn to make peace with it, but maybe this is a good point to start.

### 3. Chapter 3

#### Notes for the Chapter:

the quest is officially starting. i decided to hit a lot of the same beats as in canon, with subtle twists, in order to slowly let the most canon divergence aspects creep in as it goes.

hope you enjoy this one

After the Siren's Song incident, Percy has a nightmare of two men, fighting at an unfamiliar beach shore during a storm. Bearded, long haired and muscular, they did their best to bring the other down, but neither succeeded. An endless battle, and he had to stop it but couldn't.

He recognized one of them, from another dream—his father, with his green eyes and dark hair, and that angry glare. It didn't stop him from trying to approach them, even through his fear, because a part of him understood that whatever this was, it was more important than his personal feelings, so he had to push them aside.

And then the voice spoke. Gentle, intelligent; the way Gabe spoke to people when he was trying to scam them, only with the charm and intensity revved up to a thousand. Trying to convince him.

*What for? It asked. Let them fight. They'll give you nothing.*

*They'll use you, just like they used your mother.*

*Come down, Perseus.*

It was an awful, awful nightmare, and it left him feeling angry, isolated, and powerless.

Mr. D seemed to notice his bad mood, because when he ran his eyes over him after threatening to make him spontaneously combust, he seemed disappointed at his lack of a reaction. He looked at Chiron, stage-whispered

*‘did someone die?’* And then laughed at his own joke, reaffirming that Chiron’s plan was no better than letting him turn him into something, before disappearing.

Percy turns towards Chiron the second he can breathe through the leftover scent a drunk like Mr. D carries with him. “Are you giving me a quest?”

Chiron winces. “I see you’ve been mingling with the gossip. Why don’t you both sit?”

The talk goes... better than his dreams, maybe. He is unfairly accused of being a thief, explained that a lightning bolt is missing, it’s on him to stop a devastating war, and given a deadline.

“And, of course,” Chiron finishes, glancing nervously up at the sky. “Mr. D neglected to clarify, but the meeting he headed off to is just part two of their discussion about you.”

Percy sighs. “Part two?”

“It’s been determined that you either return the bolt or... die,” Chiron looks pained, and Grover bleats nervously. “A war would start, after all, if you didn’t, so death would be swift to come to all of us, but especially to you. That, however, is not all.”

Percy doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t think he needs to, so Chiron continues. “The council is currently trying to determine if they shall allow your existence, regardless of whether you succeed in returning the bolt.”

“What?” His voice cracks. “But—”

“The vote won’t happen until the solstice, Percy,” Chiron sighs. He looks older today, like his millennia of existence is finally starting to catch up to him. “You have until then to prove that you’re an asset to Olympus. Mr. D mentioned that the vote is currently split, though I won’t tell you who’s in your favor and who isn’t. But they’re confident that a resolution is to happen at the solstice, ideally after you return the bolt to Lord Zeus.”

“Right,” Percy says, his throat dry. “So it’s death, or potential death.”

“Indeed,” Chiron nods. “So do you accept?”

Of course he does.

The Oracle of Delphi is as dreadful as he pictured, if not more. The fact that the corpse is dressed up like a hippie makes the image even worse, and Percy tries not to stare into it—her—skull, or take in too many details, willing himself to ignore the underlying smell of what he assumes is rotting flesh under the reptile scent. Only being in the room gives him a headache, and he can’t help but feel a tiny bit of sympathy for whoever this person was. No one deserves this.

It’s made even worse when she opens her mouth; the way she moves is not natural, the mist that curls at his feet makes him dizzy, but the words drum into his skull, as if wanting to melt his brain: *I am the spirit of Delphi, speaker of the prophecies of Phoebus Apollo, slayer of the mighty Python. Approach, seeker, and ask.*

Despite his knees shaking, Percy makes a mental note to tell Lee to get it to his dad, somehow, that he really needs to upgrade the customer service on this thing, because this seems counterproductive to make heroes want to go on quests.

Somehow—perhaps through sheer pettiness, though it could also be called courage—Percy has it in himself to ask. “What is my destiny?”

The main thought ringing in his head as he comes down the stairs is that the reminder of Smelly Gabe was rude, unnecessary, and terrifying. Also, he hates his life. Together with Chiron and Grover, they iron out the final details.

The good take-away: he’s getting a chance for revenge for his mom, and a trip across the country to California. The bad take-away: he’s going to fail, and his father is using him.

At least he gets to choose who he’s going to fail with.



“What do you mean you aren’t taking me?” Annabeth crosses her arms, glaring at him from behind Chiron. Chiron casually moves away from her line of fire; personally, Percy thinks she’s just pissed because he ruined her entrance. She’s probably been practicing that one for a while. “I’ve been waiting for this forever!”

“That’s not my problem!” Percy protests, glaring back. “The quest is already suicide, and my behaviour during it is supposed to determine if I live or die! I’d like to take someone who I can be confident won’t stab me in the back like you have.”

“You’re still mad about that?” Annabeth scoffs, rolling her eyes. “It was a game!”

“It got me claimed!” Percy shoots back. Absent-mindedly, he notices Silena and Lee approaching, having already led their cabins to breakfast. “It was my first week here, and you used me as bait without giving me a warning. I don’t care if you were there as back-up, *I* thought I was alone. You just wanted to let Luke take the flag to get brownie points!”

Annabeth clenches her jaw, her eyes stormier than the rain above them. “Who else would you take, then? No one else in camp would be willing to risk themselves to go on a quest with a child of the Big Three whose life depends on good behavior—which, judging by your attitude since you’ve arrived, you’re probably going to fail anyways!”

Percy stands up, slamming his hands on the table, and the wind picks up—blowing a stray deck of cards away, wiping Annabeth’s ponytail in the air. It doesn’t smell like a storm; it smells like salt-water and he feels it rise with the anger in his gut.

“Say that again,” he snaps, narrowing his eyes, and Annabeth falters, visibly uncomfortable. “You don’t know anything about me—”

“Annabeth, Perseus, please—” Chiron calls, but it falls to deaf ears as Annabeth talks over him, her pride winning over her self-preservation.

“Don’t be thick. This isn’t all about you, Percy. This is about avoiding a war!”

“And if I’m going to be in the middle of that then I should choose whoever I want to help me! I don’t care if you want glory or if you’re overcompensating, I’d rather take Lee, or Silena!”

Annabeth turns up her nose, and something in him goes very, very still. “Please. Lee, I could understand, but what is a daughter of Aphrodite going to do for you—?”

“Annabeth that is *enough!*” Chiron exclaims, raising his voice—probably for the first time since Percy’s met him, at least with that tone, with that edge of both fury and disappointment. It snaps his mouth shut, since he knows when an adult *means it*, but Annabeth’s expression becomes defiant, up until Chiron looks at her, and it stops her stone cold.

It seems Chiron’s never looked at her like that before, unlike how others have looked at Percy: like he’s the sole reason he’s ruining someone’s life.

“Child, you know better than to disrespect the gods like this. You’re talking about Lord Apollo and Lady Aphrodite’s children. If you don’t adjust your perspective, it won’t only be Percy being judged before the council on the solstice, no matter what role either of you might play in the future. Percy is in his right to choose his quest companions, as it is and how it has been and how it always will be. Are we all in agreement?”

The hurricane brewing in Percy’s gut settles, as seems to do the righteous fury in Annabeth’s eyes. She makes eye contact with him, and practically spits her next words out. “Fine. Suit yourself.”

She storms off, and Percy brews in his anger for a few seconds, before turning to Chiron. “When am I leaving?”

Expression grim, Chiron glances briefly up at the sky, sighing. “This afternoon would be ideal, Percy. You have until midday to pack, and to decide who else you’ll be taking on the quest.”

Percy ignores Grover, as well as Silena and Lee, and walks back towards his cabin. There's quite a lot of nasty names running through his head for Annabeth, right now, but he knows that he gains nothing out of spitting them out, even just to blow steam off. He gets what he thinks he'll need ready—which, considering his meager belongings, amounts to a change of clothes and a toothbrush.

Then, he sits at the edge of his bed, and breathes in and out, trying to control himself. He is not going to play dumb; the pull on his gut and the way the wind picked up meant that he was about to screw something up, about to give the gods a reason to put him down, and he can't afford that. Not without getting to see his mom one last time, at least.

There's a knock on his door, and he hesitates to open, because he doesn't want any more trouble, but still does anyway. Better to get it over with.

Silena smiles at him. "Hi."

Percy lets his shoulders drop. "That was a lot."

"Yeah, about that..." Silena winces, and despite Percy holding the door open for her, she doesn't come in. A rock drops to the bottom of his stomach. "Percy, I appreciate you wanting to take us on the quest, but..."

"No," Percy shakes his head, incredulous. "What? No. Silena—"

"Percy," Silena interrupts, sweet as ever. "Percy, it's best if Annabeth goes."

Percy waits for the punchline, but it never comes. "I—are you kidding? I need to control my temper for the gods, not make it *explode*. How will that help me?"

"Think about it," Silena swallows, lowering her voice. "Percy... She's a daughter of Lady Athena, Lord Zeus' right hand. Lord Apollo would be almost as good, except he hasn't been in Lord Zeus' good graces for quite a bit. Everyone says he's... inefficient, and more focused on his arts."

“So?” Percy crosses his arms, frowning. “I don’t care who anyone’s godly parent is—”

“But you should,” Silena frowns. “Percy, the key to surviving Olympus is playing their game. I already told you this, and their game involves politics. It involves knowing the right people, making friends with them, and both my mother and Lord Apollo usually vote contrary to what Lord Zeus would prefer. And you have to admit, Annabeth has her skills. She can be helpful.”

“I haven’t seen her skills,” Percy mumbles, rolling his eyes. “Alright, so she can wrestle with Clarisse for more than ten seconds. But this political thing... I don’t know anything about that, Silena.”

“See it like this, Percy,” Silena takes a deep breath. “You go on the quest together. Despite your bad start, you prove you can get along with the daughter of your father’s rival to get things done, and also help Annabeth with her reckless itch to go get herself killed. The gods will see potential in you. You might change the minds of some of them. You could *live*.”

Percy holds back the feelings threatening to rise up his throat, swallowing. “That’s not fair.”

“It’ll never be fair,” Silena looks down at the ground, shaking her head. “Listen, Percy, I know it looks bad. But it could get better. We have to hope it will. Otherwise, what’s the point?”

“I hate it,” Percy shakes his head, but he’s giving in. He’s giving in, and she knows it, because she wipes a tear off her eye, bracing herself. “I understand.”

“So you’ll take her?” Silena asks, already knowing the answer.

Percy nods, miserable. “Give me an hour— I’m gonna have to apologize.”

Annabeth meets him in the middle. Her lips are tightly pressed together, and she still looks like she’d rather kick his ass, but the way she meets his eyes says that she knows the same thing he does: they have to behave themselves.

So, Percy swallows his beliefs and his anger and invites her on the quest, saying that he's willing to work with her, if she's willing to work with him. It's only fair. Annabeth stiffly nods, they shake hands, and by midday, they meet Chiron by Thalia's tree, Grover standing between them and glancing nervously at both of them.

Chiron doesn't look pleased, and the look he sends Percy makes him want to turn back around and drag Lee with him, but he doesn't. He's starting to understand all the warnings, all the carefully chosen words.

Camp Half-Blood isn't a prison. No, despite appearances, it's not supposed to keep them in, it's supposed to send them out. And if they want to survive the outside, they have to be ready to play the game of the Fates, and of Olympus.

What a wretched system, all around.

Luke gives them shoes that he immediately distrusts, and Chiron gives him even more reason to, so he lets Grover have them, but takes a mental note to keep an eye on any weird behavior. Chiron gives him the best gift he's probably ever gotten—an actually balanced sword. It makes him tear up a little, and Chiron is kind enough to pretend he doesn't notice.

And off they go.

It takes ten miles before he and Annabeth are bickering again.

"You brought a book?" He asks, trying not to judge. As far as he knows, that might just be a weapon for a daughter of Athena, but the way she frowns indicates that she's not taking any jokes from him. He backpedals. "Uh, I said nothing."

"You sure did," Annabeth rolls her eyes, and sighs. "Listen, here is how this is gonna work—"

Percy exchanges a look with Grover. "Sure."

“Don’t start!” Annabeth sends him an irritated look, and Percy decides that he might as well listen. He can admit Silena had a point. Getting along could be beneficial—and it wasn’t until Luke stopped to say goodbye that Percy realized that, had he taken Silena or Lee, that would’ve meant leaving Annabeth at camp to be manipulated by that creep. He doesn’t dislike her enough to let that happen. “Our parents are rivals—don’t interrupt me! Our parents are rivals, so it’s only natural we clash, but this could be... good. For both of us. I get a quest, you get to not get killed by proving useful. We avoid war.”

Percy raises his eyebrows. Despite being judgemental as hell, Annabeth has more in common with Silena than she thinks. “I mean, I agree.”

Now it’s Annabeth’s turn to look surprised. “You do?”

“Yeah, I mean—” Percy sighs, wondering how honest he should be. He decides to go safe. “I kinda wanna live. This could be... a business relationship?”

“A business relationship,” Annabeth repeats, pausing to think about it. She doesn’t seem to find anything wrong with it, since she starts nodding to herself, and then extends her hand out for him to shake. Percy does, and catches Argus and Grover exchanging amused looks. Great. “So it will be, then.”

“Is bickering still allowed?” Percy asks, mostly to break the ice, and Annabeth rolls her eyes again, but doesn’t talk back. He’ll take that win.

Grover brings him back down to earth when they step down at Greyhound Station, reminding him of what he actually wants out of this quest—more than living, more than avoiding a war, Percy just wants to see his mom. The knowledge that she married Gabe to protect him sinks into his heart and drags him down, and the rain never lets up. The knowledge that Zeus is watching—that the gods are all watching, including his deadbeat father—doesn’t do anything to improve his mood.

Then their bus explodes. Typical luck, honestly.

“What did I do?” Percy grumbles, trying not to get hit by tree branches. “I was literally just minding my business.”

“They think you’re the thief, Percy. The gods hardly need much more as an excuse to kill you,” Annabeth shrugs, and Grover seems to agree. “For them, your quest is not retrieving the bolt. It’s seeing how long you can make it without getting killed before the solstice. Now hurry up, the further we get away from the scene, the better.”

“Maybe the three Kindly Ones made them trigger happy,” Grover suggests, but when he sees the expression Percy makes at the idea that both Hades and Zeus want a piece of him, he changes subject. “I lost all my tin cans.”

“We lost all our supplies,” Percy sighs. So much for dracmas and a hundred bucks. Crap. His toothbrush. “This is just fantastic. Is this why you wanted to go on a quest so badly? The experience? Because so far it blows.”

“As a matter of fact, yes,” Annabeth turns towards him for a second, as she keeps walking, just to let him see her irritated frown. “This is what we train for, Percy. The *real* world. Camp is supposed to prepare us to be who we are meant to be.”

Percy wonders if she knows they’re all being used, or if she likes the idea of being a hero too much to notice. “Whatever. Grover, do you know anything about which berries are not poisonous?”

Grover opens his mouth to answer, but Annabeth gets there first. “Well, Percy, if you’re so worried about our supplies, maybe you shouldn’t have come back into the fight—”

A short argument ensues. Annabeth eventually admits that she’s glad he didn’t abandon them, but it’s like pulling teeth. Still, Percy decides to play nice, and he admits back that he thinks it was cool of her to piggyback that Fury. Grover almost seems proud by their restraint, and thanks them by making them both walk blindly into trees.

True friendship, really.

The second they smell burgers, Percy loses sight of his frustration towards Annabeth, boiling in the silence of their walk through the forest. Grover immediately seems uneasy but he's a vegetarian, so his opinion enters through one ear and comes out of the other.

He regrets not listening to him less than half-an-hour later.

Aunty Em is too friendly. A fog of hunger and tiredness clouds his judgment and he allows himself to lower his guard, just for a moment, wanting to rest. The educated part of him tries to be nice to the lady feeding them; it isn't until then that things start going downwards.

To Annabeth's credit, she noticed first. "Two sisters?"

Aunty Em smiles, and a shiver goes down his spine. "Why, yes, child. It is not really a story for children, but this man, you see—he took advantage of me, and no one afterwards would help me, except for my sisters. In fact, I was punished for it, by an equally bad woman. They stayed with me until they couldn't any longer."

"Advantage... how?" Percy asks, glancing at Annabeth. She's suddenly sitting with her back straight, eyes narrowed. Grover is looking a little green.

"Oh, it was awful, really. Not meant to be spoken out loud," Aunty Em sighs, but her smile doesn't drop. Percy almost flinches when she reaches out and touches his shoulder, squeezing, and then sets that hand under his chin, tilting it up so she can take a better look at him. "You remind me quite a lot of him, sweetheart. Those green eyes, so beautiful... hm, yes, it's like it happened yesterday."

From the corner of his eyes, Percy notices Annabeth going pale, and her hand heading for her dagger—only for Aunty Em to turn towards her, stopping her in her attempt. Grover darts his eyes between the tree of them, horrified, and Percy starts to feel panic crawling up his throat, cutting through his daze.



Suddenly, he doesn't think Auntie Em is friendly. The way she smiles, and moves, how she speaks to them as if she knows them—she's bloodthirsty.

They have to go.

"Oh, and those grays of yours, Annabeth," she says, nodding. "So unique. It's been so long..."

Percy does the first thing that comes to mind: he bites the hand under his chin.

Probably not a smart move; Auntie screams and turns towards him as she stands, and Annabeth takes the distraction to duck under the table and come out right next to him, just as Percy hears—*feels*—Auntie's thin fingers cracking, blood filling his mouth, burning until he chokes, Auntie's scream becoming a roar of rage.

"Close your eyes!" Annabeth yelps, and Percy does so as he falls backwards, spitting out the acid, ignoring the pain in favor of crawling away from the table. He hears Grover screaming *Maia!* And manages to stand, but the sound of wood creaking comes—something slams against a wall, and he isn't nearly dumb enough not to get that that was their table. "Percy, it's—"

"Medusa!" Grover whimpers from above them, and Percy fumbles for his sword, uncapping it. Just his luck, one of the first monsters they come across after the Kindly Ones has a grudge against both him and Annabeth—or rather, their parents. "Oh, Styx, Percy, move!"

Newsflash: reptiles move fast and almost silently. Grover's warning is enough that Medusa doesn't manage to grab him by the hair for more than two seconds before she's getting shoved back by a slash of Riptide, roaring in pain, the hissing of the snakes of her hair and her throat reminding him of the Oracle of Delphi.

He had thought the Oracle was disturbing, and killing the Minotaur an adrenaline trip. But this, tripping over his own feet and the broken pieces of wood from the smashed table, blind—this is truly terrifying. He has no idea

where Annabeth is, how Grover is doing, or how they're going to come out of this one. If some god chooses to blast them with lightning again, he doesn't think they'd be so lucky as to survive this time.

"Curse you, heroes!" Medusa screams, and Percy uses the sound to create more distance between them, trying to pretend he isn't shaking. "Coming into my territory—a child of Poseidon, that wretched man, and a daughter of Athena! If you knew my pain, children, and the wrath of the gods, you would let me end your lives swiftly, and spare you your fates!"

"Don't listen to her!" Annabeth calls; she makes him jump and almost gets herself stabbed, since her voice comes from beside him. "Don't open your eyes, Percy. We need to get close—"

"Go ahead, Perseus Jackson!" Medusa moves; her voice comes closer, so Percy slashes out again. This attempt doesn't quite work, since he hits the air, and Medusa laughs. "Do you have any idea what your parents have done, little godlings? You're risking your young lives for them, for the gods, without understanding what awaits you! The Underworld is no place for you. The Olympians will eat you alive and expect you to thank them for it!"

"Beats being a statue," Percy says through his teeth, keeping his tone low. His tongue burns. His mouth feels like it could start bleeding any second now. Medusa hisses at them, the sound multiplied by the snakes of her hair, and Annabeth yelps in pain. What?

"Poison," Annabeth's voice comes strangled with pain as she moves back, and Percy moves with her. He has no idea if she can see or not, but it beats getting closer to the crazy reptile lady. "Oh, gods—"

"Do you see it now, Annabeth?" Medusa asks, softening her voice. "There is no escape. You're young. You're smart. There's no reason for you and Perseus to waste your life fighting for the gods—Poseidon disgraced me, and when I begged your mother for help, what did I get? Cursed! Shunned!"

“You broke your vows!” Annabeth tries to steel her voice, but it doesn’t work. “Poseidon offended my mother! Divine law says—”

A hiss, and then Percy feels what Annabeth meant, burning drops of poison falling on his arms. He grits his teeth, wincing, as Medusa seems to get even closer to them. Another slash at the air gets him a pained hiss, more drops of poison from the snakes burning at his skin.

“An excuse!” Medusa roars. “Pitiful and pathetic! The gods will hide behind them, they will never be kind to you and me! Did I not bear Poseidon two children—your siblings, Perseus, and yet I’m less than them, less than you, because of a prideful goddess! Let me kill you now, and spare you the feeling of being their puppet. You’ll suffer less pain, my children —”

“Duck!” Grover yells out, and Percy drops without hesitation. A loud impact comes, and Medusa screams in pain, cursing. “This is for Uncle Ferdinand!”

“You miserable satyr!” Medusa seems to engage in a scuffle with Grover, from the sounds of it—shifting, wacking, the distinct noise that comes from Grover’s head hitting the ceiling. “I would’ve let you go, if not for this—!”

“Annabeth, do I—” Percy cuts himself off, coughing. His mouth is dry now, and he hopes that monster blood isn’t too poisonous because the pain of it burning his mouth is already making him dizzy. He tentatively opens his eyes, but a quick glance doesn’t give him any clue to where she is, so he closes them again. “—her head?”

“I—” Annabeth takes a deep breath, rebalancing herself. “Yes, of course, the head. But Percy, the poison, you got her ichor in your mouth already—”

“I noticed.” Percy grunts out, and then Annabeth gasps. For a second, he thinks that Medusa is attacking them again, and he’s about to try to strike back, but Annabeth grabs his elbow.

“The poison! Of course, that could work—” Annabeth goes, and Percy resists the urge to snap at her to just *get on with it*. “Percy, we’re in a gas

station. It has a bathroom—plumbing. Sprinklers. That could cause a distraction.”

Oh. He falters. “I don’t know if I can—”

Medusa roars again, and Percy hears the sickening sound of Grover hitting the floor, crying out in pain. They’re out of time.

He tries to focus, but it’s hard when he hears Medusa approaching them, now—they scatter, footsteps going in different directions, but he almost trips over another piece of wood and ends up slamming his middle against the fast-food counter, rattling the grill. A roar, a scream, but it’s Annabeth this time.

Fear grips him as Medusa laughs. “I’ll take her first, Percy, dear—your father would prefer it this way. He has no love for Athena’s scheming scum. Do you really think you can trust the daughter of a goddess like Athena? You should give in to me. You’ll never have to experience that betrayal.”

“We’ve done nothing to you!” Percy forces out, through the pain—another coughing fit, and this time he feels blood dripping down his lips. Oh, no. “We’re not our parents!”

“That’s what you godlings don’t understand,” Medusa snaps, and Annabeth yelps. He has no idea what she’s doing to her, but it doesn’t sound good. “You’re their tools! What has Poseidon done for you, Perseus? Claim you? He might as well have killed you!”

“Shut *up*—” Percy tries, the stress getting to him. His heartbeat beats wildly in his ears and he has no idea if Grover is alive or if he’s a statue now, he has no idea what Annabeth’s pained whimpers mean. This is worse than the Minotaur—there, he could do something. He found a way. But right now, he can’t see an exit to this. “You don’t know me—”

“Oh, but I do. I was slain by Perseus once, already, after all. I gave birth to two children for Poseidon, two sons for the sea. I know you better than you know yourself, Percy Jackson. I know of the pain that awaits a little hero

like you. I can already see you, losing your innocence, giving in to the call of the sea—”

“Shut up!”

“—the call of your father—”

“No!”

“I know of what cruelty you would be capable of, destroyer, Περσεύς! Your father reaps what he sows, and he has plans for you, if he has allowed you to breathe another minute!”

Something snaps.

It takes Percy a second to realize that it isn’t just the soda fountain exploding, or the ceiling sprinklers showering them with more water than they’re probably designed for. No, the ground groans, protests with the strength of his anger, of his fear, shivering, shaking. He doesn’t put a name to it, right away, but he catches on as Medusa screams, Annabeth echoing her with a roar of anger.

He moves faster than he himself expected, crossing the room, towards the sounds of fighting. A body is pushed into his, tall, covered in soft fabrics, and he doesn’t hesitate to bring his sword upwards, the water muffling the sound of Riptide slicing a clean cut through Medusa’s neck.

Her body drops, and with it, the earth stops.

Vaguely, an echo of Chiron’s voice reaches him.

*Earthshaker.*

Oh.

“Percy,” Annabeth calls, her voice shaky. She sounds like she might cry.  
“Percy, is it over?”

He takes a deep breath, listening. No hissing comes, no more vicious words to go with the snake venom. As they stand together in silence, the sprinklers gradually stop raining on them. Percy looks at the ceiling, opening his eyes, the lights blinding him—but he opens his mouth and allows the water to go in, feeling it heal his burns.

He spits the mixture of blood and poison onto the ground, looking down—finds Medusa’s head luckily turned down, only the back of it and her mess of snake hair visible. It’s still connected to her neck, his cut not deep enough to sever it. Her body doesn’t dissolve, either. Ichor starts to seep into his shoes so he steps back, shivering. He feels like he might throw up the burger.

“I think it’s over,” he whispers, and then forces himself to look around—runs at Grover’s body and turns him over, immediately receiving a groan of protest. He gets so relieved, it makes him dizzy all over again. “Oh, thank god.”

“Gods,” Annabeth corrects, coming up behind him. Percy looks at her, and then does a double take. Her hair is uneven, her ponytail undone and practically shredded. Her arms are covered in blisters, and there are small bite marks all over her skin. Despite it, and despite the shakiness of her voice, Annabeth doesn’t let any tears escape her eyes. “Come on, we need to wake him up.”

It takes them an hour, but the three of them get back to a semblance of normal. Grover is alright—he just hit his head on the ceiling when Medusa grabbed the stick he was using to hit her, and passed out cold as a result. His head bled a little bit, more to scare them than anything else. After that, Percy stares at Annabeth gathering whatever supplies were left after his stun with the water and the earthquake, her hair still a mess, and a fresh wave of anger gets him.

Medusa was right. Horrifyingly, disturbingly right, and beyond it perturbing him, it makes him pissed. He holds the adrenaline responsible for what he does next: shouldering past Annabeth who's using her dagger and a fallen mirror to even out her shoulder-length hair, to grab a box and postal

stickers, a marker he finds on the floor, and Medusa's head. He has to cut it from the rest of her body, but he's too blind with his emotions to care.

"What do you think you're doing?" Annabeth asks, her voice tight, but she's out of energy to argue. She doesn't stop him, even as she stands beside him and watches him write. "What— Percy, you're going to get us *killed*—"

"Fine if so," he snaps, clenching his jaw, sealing the box. "Medusa was right. We either died to her, or to some other monster tomorrow, or to the gods when they decide they've had enough of us—"

"Percy!" Annabeth protests, and tries to grab the marker off his hand to keep him from signing it, but she's too late. The box disappears, and she goes pale. "You idiot! We're screwed! *You're* screwed— the vote to let you live depends on good behavior!"

"If they want me to behave they're going to have to earn it," Percy crosses his arms, looking at Grover. At his terrified expression, he falters. "Hey—I'll make sure they won't take you with me."

"I would rather they didn't take you at all," Grover shakes his head. "Percy, what are you even thinking?"

"That I'm on this stupid quest for them, and I don't expect them to hand the answers to me on a plate," Percy takes a deep breath. "But they tried to kill me on that bus. And it can't be coincidence that the bus exploded where it did— just off this road, to get us right into Medusa's trap. It's ridiculous."

"It's a test, Percy!" Annabeth presses her hands against her face— hiding tears of frustration or just trying to slap some sense into herself. "That is how quests go! That's what the Three Fates do!"

"Right, as if just going out of camp isn't dangerous enough!" Percy swallows and looks down at his feet. "I really don't get you, Annabeth— why are you even here? You seemed pretty comfortable letting me go alone after I told you I didn't want you here. What are you gaining out of playing this stupid game?"

Annabeth flinches, and then hesitates. Her anger fails to meet the image she wants to project. “It’s none of your business—”

“Yes, it is! This is my quest, you’re my quest partner, and by this point, we’d probably be dead without each other— without Grover!” Percy gestures at him, and Grover winces, wanting to stay out of it.

“Guys...” he tries, but Annabeth finds a response.

“I’m trying to— to do well by myself!” Annabeth raises her voice, as if the volume would give her the courage to push the words out. Percy sees moisture gathering in her eyes. “You wouldn’t get it. I’ve always been alone, my dad never cared about me. He replaced me with two normal children that wouldn’t give him any trouble, and he forgot all about Athena, so I ran away, and I couldn’t protect the only family I’ve ever had!”

Percy looks at her fists, shaking at her sides. “What Thalia did wasn’t your fault—”

“I know!” Annabeth snaps, lips trembling. She forces them into a line. “I know! She— she did that by herself. That was her choice, and it was *wrong*. She should’ve listened to mom. Mom told her the path she was taking was wrong. She should’ve gone to Olympus and pledged loyalty to Lord Zeus. And I’ve been trying to listen, unlike her, but you just won’t, either! By this rate, you’re going to end up just like her!”

It feels like someone poured cold water down his shirt, so he doesn’t quite process the echo of the sentiment Lee’s told him about—how no one at camp wants him dead, how they’re all nervous around him because they’re waiting for the other shoe to drop. “You’ve been talking to your mom?”

Annabeth falters, lowering her eyes. “She gives me advice, Percy. She always has. Where do you think I got that cap? She says... she says my fate is beyond *you*. The only reason I’ve wanted to get a quest is because I knew I’d need the experience to get through whatever my real fate is. I can’t sit around camp for the rest of my life, just waiting, Percy! I refuse to! And if I want to get out I have to play by the rules, regardless of whether they’re fair or not.”



Percy thinks about Silena's words, before he left, when he was convincing him to take Annabeth. About how it's better to play their game and aim for a tie than refuse them and lose by default. She said it, as well; the gods aren't kind. They care more about saving face than about their children. They'll never be fair, but they have to hope for something better.

Annabeth is playing right into her mom's cards, and aware that she is, because she aspires for more— whatever that ends up being. Thalia refused to listen to the gods, and she ended up punished at the first sign of an excuse rearing its head. Luke acts like a psycho, bringing people in with a smile that hides years of anger behind it; that hides something evil that Percy's seen many times before in Gabe and his friends. He isn't playing for Olympus, either— but that doesn't mean he's forfeited.

The weight of the quest bears down on him again. It's greater than his own life. Greater than a vote. Greater than his *mom*, which he never thought would be possible, for something greater than her to exist.

He thinks of his dream. The voice— telling him to give in.

No.

Percy stares at the place where the box with Medusa's head was, and, because coincidences don't really exist, thunder roars, and the rain starts falling once again. He closes his eyes.

"I'm going to have to apologize." He says, sighing, and Grover pats his shoulder.

"It'll be fine," he tries, but the silence afterwards is telling. "Guys... maybe let's not have conversations like these again? Not... not when they're watching."

Annabeth clears her throat. "I agree."

Percy opens his eyes and thinks of Medusa's words, of cruelty— is he really capable of it? Is he capable of playing their game, of learning the rules and winning?

He'll have to find out.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

by the way guys, I'm participating in a Valentine's Day fic exchange organized by the lovely, wonderful, sexy, brilliant ashilrak! If you're interesting in participating and receiving (and giving) some love to PJO ships, here's the tumblr post, which would be cool if you shared:

<https://ashilrak.tumblr.com/post/671919981600145408/hello-in-past-fandoms-ive-held-gift-exchanges>

And here's the sign up link!:

[https://archiveofourown.org/collections/Percy\\_Jackson\\_Gift\\_Exchange\\_VDay\\_2022/profile](https://archiveofourown.org/collections/Percy_Jackson_Gift_Exchange_VDay_2022/profile)

Sign-ups close January 15th, so you have time to think about it

Thanks for reading!

## 4. Chapter 4

### Notes for the Chapter:

ah, yes, i hope you enjoy this. here is where things start going the same.... but different. even more so. have fun!

A new feeling of guilt settles over Percy as Grover tells him about Pan. Not only did he drag Grover into this quest by association, but sending Medusa's head to Olympus like that, letting his anger get the best of him... it might do Grover more harm than good if they fail. He needs to get his head on straight. The last thing he wants is to ruin Grover's dreams, even if they seem close to unachievable.

He is still not sure if he fully understands Annabeth. Grover insists he cuts her some slack, and he can see where that comes from—it must have not been pretty or easy to let go of Thalia and reconciling with the fact that she made her own choice to fight back—but it's difficult to do that when their points of view on this are so different.

How could she be so willing to listen to her mother? To trust her? Sure, Annabeth has the opposite relationship he has with his father, she doesn't seem afraid of her—but she's still a goddess. She's still voting to kill him; if the fact that she's rivals with his father means anything, it probably means she doesn't like Percy any more than Annabeth likes him. She's probably willing to put him down just because he was born at all, never mind the supposed theft he committed. How can she handle interacting with someone that... heartless?

It doesn't sit right with him, but perhaps that's something he's bound to get used to.

“Percy,” Grover says, hesitating. “I know you say you're only doing this for your mom, but... is that the only reason?”

Percy stares up at him, sighing. “I would like to reach thirteen, I guess.”

Grover makes a nervous sound, like he isn't sure he wants to say what he has in mind, but in the end, he seems to decide in favor of it. "Did you know I can read emotions, Percy?"

"No, but by this point nothing surprises me anymore," Percy frowns. "Are you reading me right now?"

"It's not that conscious of a thing..." Grover mumbles, blushing red, but he clears his throat and continues. "I just brought it up, because... I don't think you only want to do this for your mom. She's the main reason, sure, but the way I feel it, that I see it... you want your dad to notice you. You want him to force him to face you—I can't really tell if it's because you're angry with him or just because you want to know him."

Percy clenches his jaw. He should have just let Grover take the first watch. "I think you're wrong."

"I think you're in denial," Grover shoots back. "I get it, Percy— being put on trial like this... I went through something similar, though I can't really compare myself to you. It sucks. But your father seemed to want you to go undercover for as much as he could help it. He didn't even tell your mom about camp, we did. She barely knew that he's a god. And the less a demigod knows what they are, the less likely they are to get caught."

"You didn't hear all of what Medusa said about him," Percy tries not to sound too bitter, but it doesn't work. Grover flinches, so he makes an effort to soften his tone. "If he kept me alive and hidden until now, it was never for me. He doesn't care. If he cared, he would've... I dunno, made sure that mom at least had a little more money or something... he left before he even knew she was pregnant."

He keeps down that memory, that nightmare. The glowering eyes. He knew exactly what he was doing, in Percy's eyes. There's no other way around it.

The thing that confuses him is that his mom seemed to know more than she ever let on, considering the things Grover's saying. They don't match up with what she told him in Montauk. He isn't sure he even trusts what he

thought he knew about his dad anymore. There's something off and without his mom there's no way he'll ever figure it out.

“I don’t think you should trust a monster...” Grover drifts off, wincing. “I guess she was human once, but that was a long time ago. Time changes people a lot.”

“If I want to meet him, or if I want him to notice me—” Percy stops, taking a deep breath, forcing himself to relax. It won’t do for him to get angry again, not after what happened at Medusa’s. He still hasn’t processed that. “If I want any of that, Grover, it’s because I want to have a solid reason to hate him. That’s all. I’m already scared. I don’t want to blindly trust someone that left my mom all alone.”

Grover shoots him a pitying look that Percy immediately hates, so he stares at his shoes. He keeps down the rest of the truth— that he wants his father to notice him, sure, in the sense that he wants all the gods to do it, too. If they’re going to watch his every step and judge him, he might as well make it a show, and give them something to be actually angry about, like Medusa’s head, or something to make them think it might be worth keeping him alive, like doing his best to return the bolt.

Either way, he’s aware that he can’t just think about his mom now. It would be really lame if he somehow saved her, only for them to die five seconds later. They’d be together, at least, but...

He would like to live a little past twelve. And for that, he has to avoid a godly war, and do his best to prove that he deserves that extra time walking the surface.

Then Grover unwillingly puts him to sleep, even if half of it comes from his own exhaustion.

He dreams of that voice, again, and gets angry at it this time, on top of his fear. In the dream, he cannot physically scream at it his frustration—he’s too busy trying to balance his mother and his life and a war already, he *can’t be bothered* with other unknown entities trying to use him, thank you—but his feelings are clearly heard, because the voice in the pit laughs, joyful.

*Distrustful, angry, brave little hero— you don't even know the power I could give you! The wishes I could make come true for you! All you have to do is help me rise.*

A shimmering image of his mother. She's pacing in a dark cell, the walls made out of something dark that he can't quite place, still wearing the clothes from the day she was taken. He is taken over by both relief and temptation; this is confirmation she is *alive*. Tears prickle at the corners of his eyes. He feels the fight in him, the anger, drawing back slowly.

His mom turns and stops, and Percy stares at her face, reaching out, the sweet encouragement of the voice speaking to him in his ears—but when he looks into her eyes, fierce and angry, her jaw clenched and her brow furrowed, Percy hesitates.

*I can give her back to you*, the voice insists, but Percy just looks at his mom, remembers everything she's done for her and what she's taught him. Everything comes at a price. His mom has never hidden the things she's had to do for work from him, reminding him of this very fact. Kindness is the best weapon, and sometimes you have to give in—but there are some terms you shouldn't ever listen to.

And Percy's not willing to listen to these terms, when he could get his mom himself, even if it costs him his life.

A door opens behind his mom, and she turns. She instantly bows, though Percy can't see to who. "My Lord."

Then the image vanishes, and Percy's left staring at the pit again.

*Very well*, the voice says, *you will see, soon. The gods will disappoint you.*

*Only I will be left, in time.*

Percy stares at the dead as they come to wake him, cold hands grabbing him, shaky, sorrowful voices giving him warnings that he had not noticed before. It makes him shivery and nauseous, but he embraces that feeling of

uneasiness; he's not supposed to be here. He allows that to bring him back to wakefulness, and takes the feeling with him

So, it doesn't help to get a bag of nachos thrown at him as breakfast. He barely manages to stomach it down, trying to process that dream. But whatever that *thing* is, that voice, it terrifies him. It freezes him solid. He can't listen to it. Something in his gut tells him it's a trick. It's not going to be any better than, say, if his father was the one whispering in his ear, ordering him around...

Ugh. That's not a good way to start the day. The pink poodle does absolutely nothing to improve it, as well, but at least they get train tickets out of it.

He wishes to keep the dream for himself, but after taking a nap on the train, Percy wakes up to Annabeth's inquiring questions, after another round of not listening to that voice—because he doesn't just drool in his sleep, now. He also talks.

"You can't barter with Lord Hades," Annabeth says, readjusting Grover's cap to hide his horns. "You know that, right? His wife would be furious with him, probably already is, since the Underworld is powerful. I doubt its Queen would be wrapped up in this plot, and it's not a coincidence this is happening while she's out. I don't care if his Kindly Ones weren't as aggressive this time—"

"You've met them before?" Percy cuts in, and Annabeth presses her lips together flat. He is not done probing, though. If he had to share his dreams, he wants to know what information Annabeth has that might be useful. "Was it when you arrived at camp?"

Annabeth scowls, but she nods. "Yes. I don't think you need any more context than that, if you've heard the rumors. The point is, you can't trust Hades to give you your mom back—"

"I wasn't planning to," Percy shakes his head, and decides to voice the thought that he was actually having. "Why were the Kindly Ones asking where *it* is, though?"

“Looking for the bolt—” Annabeth stops in her tracks, frowning. “But...”

“Lord Hades is supposed to have it,” Percy finishes for her, fidgeting in his seat. He can’t help but look around nervously, because ever since they walked away from Medusa’s, he’s felt watched. “So, what were they looking for?”

“Sometimes monsters call demigods *it*,” Annabeth suggests, but she sounds unsure. “I don’t know, Percy. We have to trust our gut on this one. Who else could it be if not Lord Hades? Besides, he actually has your mom. No one else could offer you your mom back.”

Percy lets that sink in, trying to agree, but it feels wrong. In the end, he shakes his head, and decides not to keep discussing that. Instead, he attempts to figure out what he should actually do about his mom. “What would you do in my place? If your dad got taken, or something?”

Annabeth sighs and shrugs, looking ahead. “I’d leave him to rot.”

Getting more context on Annabeth’s family makes him feel some sense of... pity, or perhaps just basic understanding. “Is that why you’re so hung up on your mom? Because she helped you?”

“That the thing, Percy,” Annabeth wrinkles her nose at him. “You don’t get it yet. You’ve barely known about this world for a couple weeks, but I’ve always known. Being *normal* is not a thing for us. We have to think bigger, faster, and more dangerous than that. I love my mom, and she’s helped me, and I want to make her proud and make a name for myself. You can’t expect *your* dad to be like that.”

Percy’s eye twitches. “Why, because he’s inferior to your mom?”

“Because he’s in charge of one of the biggest realms known to us,” Annabeth rolls her eyes. “I’m just saying, waiting for a birthday card seems kinda dumb to me.”

Percy stares at her, and then turns away. She has a point, but he’s... confused. He feels like he’s gotten mixed signals all his life. His mom tells



him he never cared, only for him to have two conflicting memories of his father looking at him, and then for Grover to say that his distance was the best way to protect him. He doesn't understand, and Percy can't help but want to default to his sentiment from earlier with Grover; he only cares about his father as much as he cares about his mom, which still seems to be not at all in his eyes.

As for the rest, Percy wonders what will happen if he lives, but doesn't get his mom back... what is he supposed to do? Moving to camp seems like the only option, because there's no way he's coming back to Gabe, but even that is unthinkable. Percy doesn't know what he'd do if he never got to see Sally Jackson again— if he never got to hug her and breathe in her scent of candies, if he never got to spend another night watching movies and eating pizza with her.

Unwillingly, tears well up in his eyes, but he blinks them away. Annabeth doesn't mention them, probably because she herself has shed quite a few. It feels like their truce, or their business relationship, is a little stronger now. Their confusion and suspicion over Hades and whether he's the one sending him those dreams is shared, but it's not like they can do much about it, other than get on with the quest.

Which somehow involves him jumping off The Gateway Arch, as it turns out.

He's gonna kill Annabeth if he gets out of this one, her capacity to say sorry to an unnecessary insult notwithstanding.

He prays to his father, as he falls. Not because he trusts him, but because he knows that he must be some sort of investment. If Zeus sent Echidna specifically for him, and he dies here, then that puts a wrinkle in his father's plans. The way he remembers him staring at him, as a baby— that was a test. The sea life talking to him, playing pranks, that man in a trench coat that freaked his mom out, the snake in his crib... his father has been watching for years.

If Echidna is a test by Zeus, then he failed. But he has a feeling his father cares very little for Zeus' opinions of him.

*You have plans for me*, Percy thinks, as he falls, under panic. *Don't prove him right. Don't let me fail here. Don't let me fall.*

The impact hurts. He falls on his back, which is probably the only thing that saves him from passing out, because while it's probably nowhere near as bad as falling into concrete, it still makes him scream in pain. It's a confusing feeling; the water hurts him but it immediately starts healing him, and for several seconds, Percy can't think straight.

When his eyesight clears, he comes face-to-face with a catfish that looks at him and goes *yikes, dude*, before swimming away.

*That sucked.* He shakes, completely dry and able to regulate his breathing, just staring at the muddy bottom of the river, relief going through his limbs. Alright, great, so his father must at least think him worth keeping. That's good; it might keep him alive long enough to die at the solstice.

His life sucks so hard.

But then an alarming thought comes in. He ran away. He requested something from a man that he does not care about, and that only cares to keep his twelve or so years of investment. He had no chance against that Chimera. He left a mess upstairs, a family and that ranger to die, and he can't help thinking that it might just be better if he *had* died on impact. If he could drown.

*Don't be so down, hero*, a voice says, and Percy almost has a heart attack, jumping— well, as much as one can jump underwater. Moving hurts, even if the pain gradually recedes, but he still turns, looking for the voice. He spots his sword and grabs it, but there's still no sign of who it is that is speaking to him.

*What do we say, Perseus?*

*The hell?* Percy can't help but think, getting irritated. But the voice is soft, kind. It reminds him of his mom, feminine and delicate yet somehow claiming all of everyone's attention, much in the way that Silena's does. He sighs.

“Thank you.” He says, and then because he’s unsure: “Thank you... father?”

“A pitiful attempt, but very good,” the voice says, and the water swirls to his right. He stares, nervous, and a woman appears; she is tall, her features strong but with an underlying beauty to them that seems familiar, her jet black hair pinned in a braid down her back in a net of pearls and silk. She wears a dress that seems to be made out of water itself, flowing through the otherwise darkness of the lake, and illuminated only by Riptide.

Across her brow sits a circlet of polished red crab claws, and when she looks at Percy, he sees that her eyes are green like his own, reminding him of his mom. For a second Percy chokes on his emotions, on his feelings, almost calls out to her. He catches himself just in time.

“Who are you?” He asks, voice shaking.

“I see you need to polish up on your studies, boy,” the woman raises an eyebrow, tilting her head, but she doesn’t seem offended. “I am the first of the fifty Nereids, Perseus, and Queen of the Sea. In other words— I’m your step-mother. Queen Amphitrite.”

Percy’s heart sinks to his stomach. Even the water seems to get colder. “Oh, Styx.”

Queen Amphitrite’s mouth twitches, though she keeps down a smile. “Wrong relative, boy.”

“What?” Percy shakes his head— he needs to get his manners in order, or something. This is his dad’s wife, a goddess, *and* a queen. “I mean, uh— fancy seeing you here, your... highness? Uh, do you usually hang out at the bottom of rivers?”

“Oh, this is the last time I do your father a favor,” Queen Amphitrite rolls her eyes, and Percy shivers as a cold current of water goes through them. All the fish seemed to have scattered, giving them privacy. Percy can’t help but be jealous of them. When she speaks next, Queen Amphitrite sounds exasperated. “No, *boy*, I don’t make a habit of it. I see your manners need

practice as well, though I'll let it slide today, for I'm here in place of your father to deliver you a message."

Percy squirms. "That doesn't make me feel any better."

"And it shouldn't," Queen Amphitrite glances at him, looking him up and down, as if measuring and judging him. "Your father is a stern man when he wants to be, Perseus, especially when he intends for things to go a certain way. He was once a lord of prophecy, so he has a clever foresight, even if it's nowhere near as great as his temper. As you know, your father has plans for you. You're not to disappoint him again."

"Again?" Percy swallows. Unfortunately, quite a few scenarios that could disappoint his father come to mind. "Uh... which time?"

"If you need his help to save *yourself*, then you have failed, child," Queen Amphitrite's eyes gleam. She looks kind, but Percy sees the steel of her backbone. She's as dangerous as a brewing storm. "In time, you will learn to make the water bend to your will; you'd be able to jump off the highest building on Earth into water and survive, if you were to find yourself in that predicament. Your father understands you have no training, and no understanding of what you can do. Of *who* you are. So he will forgive you, this once, especially since his brother was not meant to interfere."

Percy tries really hard not to be mad, but he has to clench his jaw in order to be able to keep his opinion on that to himself. Queen Amphitrite seems to notice this, and nods approvingly. Percy is starting to feel sick. "I... I understand."

"Good." Queen Amphitrite waves her hand, and a spear appears on her hand— sharp, deadly. Percy swallows, and as a result, Queen Amphitrite nudges his chin up with the spear, making him meet her eyes. She holds him there. "Do not be so intimidated, boy. I have no grudge to pick with you, or your mother. I do not make mortals responsible for being the playthings of us gods."

"Seems like you're the only one," Percy mumbles, and then flushes red. "I — I mean—"

“Shush,” Queen Amphitrite rolls her eyes again. “I will need you to do well on your quest, Perseus. We will. War brews as we speak. Gods are picking sides. The ocean is sure to drown most of its enemies, but the world is not ready for an event such as this. You shall avoid it, and bring honor back to Atlantis and to your father, if you know what’s good for you, and for the rest of us.”

“Of course,” Percy says, because he has no other choice. He already accepted this. “I’ll do my best.”

“Rewards shall expect you, if you manage to survive the solstice,” at this, her eyes soften. “You’re but a kid. Your mother’s predicament might not be as dire as expected. Do us well, Perseus, and I’ll see you in Santa Monica.”

Percy feels hope welling up in his chest, but he pushes it down. He needs to stay focused. “Santa Monica?”

“We shall meet again there,” Queen Amphitrite nods, smiling— it completely changes her features, softening up her expression. She looks like she might be fun to hang out with, which only makes her scarier. “And one last piece of advice, Perseus: do not trust the gifts.”

He stares. “What does that—?”

Percy tries to get more information, but Queen Amphitrite vanishes as fast as she arrived, fading back into water, a cold current washing through his body until there’s nothing but him and Riptide left. Percy stares at the place where she stood and sighs.

Well. That could’ve gone worse.

The first thing he hears when he comes out of the river is a little girl pointing him out, and her mom ignoring her. The second thing is the news reporter, talking about the explosion at the top.

There were no survivors.

He stands there, frozen, listening to the rest of the news coverage but not really processing it. No survivors. That couldn't mean...? No. Surely the Chimera would've let them alone, right? Monsters and gods aren't supposed to cause this much trouble to mortals. Right?

Percy backs away, shaking. No. This... he couldn't have failed this badly, right?

Queen Amphitrite's words come back, like something out of a nightmare: *If you need his help to save yourself, then you have failed, child.*

Breathing hard, Percy starts to feel dizzy, his heartbeat racing. He ends up staring at his hands, at Riptide in pen form, feeling more useless than he's ever been in his life. He should've stayed up there with them. He should've died trying to save them. He... he can't...

"Percy!" Annabeth screams, shaking his shoulder. He jumps, drops Riptide, and Grover catches it for him. Annabeth looks almost as pale as he probably is, and Grover seems to be halfway to a fainting spell. "What happened?"

"I fell," Percy mumbles, mouth dry. He stares up at The Arch, blinking. "I jumped—I left that family up there, and the ranger. I saved myself."

Grover bleats weakly. "Percy..."

"You jumped six-hundred and thirty feet?" Annabeth shakes her head, letting go of his shoulder, for which he's glad. She seems incredulous, and then her expression shifts to horrified, bringing her hand up to cover her mouth. "Oh, those mortals..."

"There was a Chimera," Percy swallows, then stares at his feet. "And the mother of monsters, Echidna. A gift from Lord Zeus—you know what? I don't want to talk about it—"

"It's okay, Percy," Grover tries, his lower lip trembling, setting a hesitant hand on his shoulder. "These... these things happen. You can't protect everyone—"

“Whatever,” Percy snaps, clenching his fists. He feels like punching something— preferably himself. “We should go or we’re gonna miss the train.”

Annabeth shifts uncomfortably. “Alright, but—”

A cop shouts, parting the crowd, and paramedics rush through. The three of them catch the sight of the stretcher, a body covered by a thin sheet on top of it. Percy sees Grover turning to avoid looking at it out of the corner of his eyes, and Annabeth gasps, going green, but he just stares, feeling an odd mixture of angry, miserable, sad... and absolutely dead inside.

“Let’s go,” he says, though he barely recognizes his own voice. He catches the reporter saying his name and sighs. “Before someone recognizes me—and I have stuff I need to tell you.”

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Annabeth is absolutely shocked. She proves this by hitting his shoulder. “You got visited by Queen Amphitrite?”

The Amtrak speeds towards Denver, as Percy fights off a headache and hunger, and the urge to throw himself out the window. He’s officially being charged with terrorism and murder, now, according to the news, and he’s glad this will be their last stop in the train, because he doesn’t think wearing Annabeth’s hoodie over his head will keep the passengers oblivious for much longer.

“I got scolded by my step-mother,” Percy corrects, closing his eyes. “It was nice to know my dad only let me live because I’m an idiot. What do you think she meant by not accepting the gifts?”

“No idea,” Annabeth shrugs, then pauses. “We will find out, I suppose... Maybe we should tell Chiron about it.”

Grover, who’s taking a nap, snores in agreement. Percy snorts. “I guess. Without a phone, though, how—”

“You’ll see,” Annabeth interrupts, grinning. Percy rolls his eyes. “Athena —”

“—always has a plan, I know.” Percy sighs. “Do you have any snacks left?”

She doesn’t. When they pull up to Denver, Annabeth drags them into a car wash. She explains about Iris Messages—that job must get annoying—then turns towards the rainbow they created, calling for Half-Blood Hill.

Percy’s expression sours the second he recognizes who’s leaning against the railing, but Annabeth isn’t quite as put out, since she visibly brightens. Ugh. “Luke!”

He turns, and as soon as he recognizes them, his face breaks out on a grin that seems *just* a little forced. Annabeth flusters, and starts running a self-conscious hand through her newly short hair.

To their shared horror, Luke looks right at him first. “Percy! Are you going alright, bud? Is that Annabeth and Grover— what happened to you guys?”

The call is a mess. The signal is fuzzy, making it difficult to hear most of it, and Annabeth keeps tripping over her tongue until a car pulls in blaring music and she gets this murderous look on her face— yeah, between that and crazy Luke, he’s gonna pick the less imminent death, so he watches the nozzle as Grover chases after her, trying to prevent murder.

He manages to get from Luke that much like Queen Amphitrite said, people are taking sides at the threat of war, deciding which brother they’re supporting. It’s not looking good. Percy tells Luke everything, in hopes that he’ll tell Chiron, but he keeps most of his talk with Queen Amphitrite to himself— he doesn’t trust him with that.

His suspicions are rewarded when Luke makes weird comments about Annabeth, and not for the first time he’s glad he brought her over, in the end, though he could’ve probably avoided having to jump off The Arch if it hadn’t been for her dreams.



“How’s Silena?” Percy asks, when both of them run out of words, and Luke raises his eyebrows.

“You don’t have a crush, don’t you, Percy?” Luke asks back, and Percy isn’t fast enough at hiding his rage with that comment; he breaks out in a frown and Luke actually winces. He suddenly seems nervous. “Alright, dude, sorry, just a joke. She’s as stubborn as ever, so I’d say she’s fine.”

Percy narrows his eyes. The nozzle starts pouring out more water, despite their time with it probably being over, which stabilizes the call a little. Luke has nowhere to run. “Stubborn about what?”

“Don’t worry about it, Percy.” Luke waves it off, but it’s like Silena said—good liar, bad actor. “She’s worried about you, and about the war, just like the rest of us. Just focus on the quest, alright? We’re counting on you. You have my full support.”

Percy opens his mouth to tell him where he can shove his support, but the driver from before speeds away in terror, screaming. Annabeth must have done a number on him, and Luke uses that as an excuse to hang up on him. Percy stares at where his image stood, fuming, and doesn’t manage to calm himself down by the time Annabeth and Grover come back.

The nozzle is still pouring water. Annabeth takes one look at his face and frowns. “Is everything alright at camp? What did Luke say?”

Percy swallows his fury, deciding it’s better not to worry them. “Not much. Campers are uneasy, that’s all. C’mon— I’m getting hungry.”

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The second the motorcycle pulled up, Percy knew that the quest was going to get way, way worse. He stares along with Annabeth and Grover, from afar, the image of the driver strangely fuzzy, up until he walks through the doors of the diner.

Percy freezes up, and his heart immediately starts trying to run away from his body. It’s— that’s Smelly Gabe. He blinks, shaking his head, telling himself it can’t be; Gabe has never had a bike, and there’s absolutely no

reason he would be here, all the way in Denver, walking towards them with purpose, smirk on his punchable face.

“Grover,” Annabeth calls, her voice shaky. “Grover, what...”

“There’s no way,” Grover whimpers, and Percy stares at them. Annabeth looks like she’s seen a ghost, pale and sickly, and Grover might just pass out. “Must be a trick.”

“What?” Percy says, confused. There’s no way they know Gabe. There’s no way they’d be this scared of him— it doesn’t make sense. Percy looks back at him, eyes wide, blinking, trying to see what about him, other than the smell and his appearance, are so disturbing.

The image blurs for a second— he wouldn’t have noticed if he hadn’t been looking. His mouth drops open, and he thinks back to Silena, how she had appeared out of nowhere in the infirmary after he got claimed.

A spell? It must be. Whatever he’s seeing, it isn’t the same that Annabeth and Grover are, who do seem to be sharing a vision. It immediately makes him angry, and he grabs them both by the elbows, dragging them towards the guy as he sits down on a booth, right in front of them, instead of coming over to their table.

“Percy, no!” Annabeth yells, but he forces himself to keep quiet. Grover seems too shocked to do anything but shake. “No, no, we can’t, she’s dead —!”

He shoves them both in the booth, sitting in the middle, and glares at Gabe like he’s never dared to his face. He must admit it feels good. “Who the hell are you?”

Gabe hums, picking a toothpick from a dispenser on the table and putting it in his mouth. “You got guts, brain boy. Is that how you talk to your step-father?”

Percy narrows his eyes. “This is how I talk to bad impressionists.”

“Percy—!” Annabeth tries again, but he shushes her, which would probably get him stabbed under any other circumstances.

“It’s some illusion, guys!” He snaps, glaring at the fake Gabe. “He’s messing with us.”

“That’d be a she for them,” Fake-Gabe smirks, showing off all his teeth. Ugh, the smell is way too real, and even though he knows it’s fake, the twinkle in his eyes, sadistic and sick, makes him nervous anyways. “You’re observant, punk. I’ll give you that. Barnacle Beard finally got an interesting demigod instead of a monster for a son. Though, sometimes, those two are the same.”

“Who are you?” Percy repeats. The more he looks at him, the angrier he feels, and even though he tries his best to tame it—he doesn’t want to cause a public accident again, he has enough on his back—it seems to escape him. It sucks. “We don’t have time for this.”

“I come to help you out,” Fake-Gabe tilts his head. “You seem like you need it.”

“We really don’t. Not from you,” Percy crosses his arms. “Get on with it.”

“You’ll regret saying that,” he smiles, and then his image shifts— like clearing out a muddy glass, Gabe disappears, and all that’s left behind is a typical biker dude, muscled and big enough to intimidate anyone, wearing so much leather he probably makes sounds when he walks. “Allow me to introduce myself, then, Perseus Jackson. I’m Lord Ares, god of war and battle lust. Yours truly.”

Percy wrinkles his nose. “Clarisse’s dad?”

Ares’ eyebrow twitches. “Did you not hear me, punk? Show some respect.”

Before Percy can say something that would probably get him killed, Annabeth interjects. “Lord Ares! I’m so sorry for his behavior— Percy’s new, he doesn’t know what he’s doing.”

“New,” Ares muses, shooting Percy a disgusted look. “Next time you speak to me like that, punk, I’ll be cutting out your tongue. Now, shush. I’ll buy you dinner, and you’ll listen to me, and do as I say. Got it? Great.”

Percy stares, feeling like his head might burst from how angry that makes him, but Grover whimpers and he takes a deep breath, deciding to just do as he’s told, as Ares puts it. Annabeth is wiggling her leg underneath the table, which doesn’t help his nerves, and the waitress that takes their order seems a little concerned, but too afraid of Ares to ask what three children are doing with a crazy-looking biker.

True to his word, Percy and Annabeth get two extra-large burgers and fries, while Grover gets a salad and a veggie wrap. Ares shamelessly steals half of Annabeth’s fries, half of his own, but thankfully for Grover, he doesn’t touch his food. Then, he stares.

“Well?” He asks, chewing with his mouth open. Ugh. “Eat up, and I’ll tell you what my business with you is.”

Percy exchanges a look with Annabeth, who shrugs at him, helpless. They can’t say no.

“So, you’ve been quite the talk of Olympus, brat,” Ares starts, once they start eating. He’s suddenly not hungry at all, to be honest, and half-tempted to check, somehow, if his food has been spiked or drugged, perhaps even poisoned. And even then, he doesn’t fancy getting into a brawl with this dude. So he just eats, and listens. “Poseidon this, Zeus that, lighting bolt—boring, to be honest. So dull. Every time father misplaces his little toy, we’re all thrown into this picking a side bullshit. Had to tell your old man that Hades might have something to do with it to make it spicy. At least this time around, it looks like something will come from it, though, and *you* are useful for that.”

Well, talk about mixed signals. “Uh, I don’t really—”

Ares brings a finger up to his lips, and Percy’s words die on his tongue. Not because he’s magically taken his voice away or something, but because suddenly, a cold feeling closes in on them, similar to when Ares first

showed up looking like Gabe. Percy realizes, with dread, that as much as Ares looks trashy, he's actually dangerous. What he's feeling— it's pure fear, injected into his brain as if second-hand, and Grover starts chewing the aluminum of his veggie wrap, looking like he's going to pass out.

"I'm not done," Ares says, voice low and threatening, and Percy swallows. Annabeth is tense as a board, trying to keep her face neutral, but her elbow is digging into his side, a sign that he has to obey him. Percy hates it. "I like your attitude, kid, don't get me wrong. Breath of fresh air. But I understand you're pressed for time. So, you listen, you obey, and I'll get out of your face before you know it."

Percy stares at him, simmering in anger, but nods. Annabeth visibly relaxes, and Ares nods back, approving. "I have a suggestion for you. You can say yes or no, though I don't see why you would deny this opportunity. I need this favor to be done with, you see. My girlfriend forgot her scarf down at this waterpark, and I forgot my shield. We had a fight about it. I want you to get them back. You can speak."

"You want me to... get her scarf?" Percy asks, wondering if this is some sort of joke. He can feel one of his eyebrows twitch with stress when Ares hums, completely at ease with the suggestion. He takes a deep breath, trying to calm himself down so he doesn't say the wrong thing, but it's hard— harder than usual. He can't tell if his anger management skills are failing, or if this guy is doing it on purpose. "And some shield? Why?"

"I just told you," Ares shrugs. "I pissed her off when our date got interrupted last time, and I need to get back on her good side. That's all you need to do for me. Easy peachy, kid."

Percy blinks, hesitates to open his mouth, but Ares rolls his eyes and waves his hand at him to get it across that he has permission to talk, still. "No, I get that, but why... Why would *I* do that? Can't you get it yourself?"

Ares rolls his eyes. "Do you think I would ask you to do it if I could? No, obviously. As to, what's in it for you, if that's what you're wondering, well — I'll vote to keep you alive in the council."

Deafening silence fills the table as Percy exchanges an incredulous look with Annabeth and Grover. For his part, Grover is vigorously nodding, but Annabeth looks apprehensive, and he can tell why; there's no guarantee Ares would do that, right? No way. It's too easy. There's something he isn't telling them, and even if it *was* as easy as it sounds, who knows if Ares will actually vote for that?

He tries to find an answer to this, as Ares busies himself with the leftovers of Annabeth's burger and fries— she didn't eat a ton, probably because she's suffering from the same pit in his stomach that Percy has. How does he even deal with this?

“What if I say no?” Percy asks, deciding to take the risk, because it's better to have as much information as possible. Ares raises his eyebrows at him. “I haven't decided yet.”

“If you say no, I'll vote to get you killed,” Ares clicks his fingers at him, making the three of them jump. He laughs. “I'll even volunteer to do it! I'm sure father would love that, make it a little show. It's been a while since I've flayed anyone, you know? It'd be awesome.”

*Well*, Percy thinks, feeling like he might throw up, *at least he's honest*. “Oh. Right.”

“It's a sweet deal,” Ares nods, as if they've been talking about getting a new car, instead of *his life*. “I'll give you the address, and then a little extra after you recover the stuff— you know, a reward! I heard you need a ride to be able to get on with your quest. I'm being extremely generous, you know?”

Percy doesn't really think so. He thinks that if Ares was generous, he wouldn't need to essentially blackmail him into doing this stupid side quest for him, because who would vote to kill a kid? But there's nothing he can do about it. So, checking in with Annabeth and Grover for one last time, he's about to say yes— when he gets an idea.

“Can you swear it on the Styx?”

Annabeth nudges his side, *hard*, but Percy keeps back his wince, even as Ares' pleasant, ugly smile drops, all amusement gone. "What did you just say to me, punk?"

Percy swallows. "I'll do it. I'll promise it on the Styx, as well, I'll get the stuff back. But only if you promise it, as well."

Ares straightens up in his seat, leaning his elbows on the table, and getting so close to him that Percy can smell the fries in his breath. After so many years of Gabe, though— this is nothing. What's actually worrying is the diner suddenly going quiet, as if frozen, and the anger rising up inside him like it never has before, leaving him short of breath.

"Who do you think you are, little cousin? You think you're in any position to make a bargain like this?!" Ares barks at him, almost making him flinch as he slams a hand down on the table. "Do you want to die that badly? Because if so, be my guest—"

Ares reaches for his belt, where a keychain hangs, and Percy blurts out the first thing that comes to his mind, in full panic mode. "You can't kill me yet!"

"What?!" Ares asks, and Percy wonders why no one is calling the police on this adult screaming at three children, but again— the diner is quiet. He suspects mind control, or something. Perhaps that Mist thing Annabeth keeps talking about. "What crazy shit are you saying, punk? You think I can't kill you?"

"I— I need to make it to the solstice. I'm on trial." Percy shoots back, clenching his fists, and Ares frowns, lowers his hand back to the table. A little bit of relief goes through him, but he isn't done. "Lord Ares, I would love to do this quest for you, we do need the help— but I just want a guarantee, that's all! We'll get that scarf back to you as fast as possible. You'll have your shield before you know it. Your girlfriend will forget all about that fight."

At that, Ares' expression freezes up. "Right. Aphrodite."

*Aphrodite?* Percy thinks, though it's more like he screams it to himself in his head, panicked as he is. This guy— *Aphrodite?* Gods, who allowed that? “I— yeah, Lady Aphrodite... she probably really misses you and her scarf, you know?”

“Forget the fight,” Ares grumbles, falling back against his seat. Suddenly, all the aggressiveness is sucked out of the air and Percy can breathe again; Annabeth sags, and Grover leans on the table for support, as Ares seems to have completely forgotten about the offense, mumbling to himself. “She’d have my head... fuck, kid. You got me there.”

Percy blinks, opening his mouth. “Uh, I sure did.”

Ares glares at him and Percy squints in order to resist a flinch. “Don’t brag, brat. Fine. I promise on the River Styx, that after you get our stuff back, I will vote to keep you alive on the solstice, if you even make it there alive. Happy?”

Too stunned to speak, Annabeth shyly breaks in, bowing her head at Ares and speaking far more kindly than she ever has to him. “Thank you for your generosity, Lord Ares. We’ll complete this quest for you before you know it.”

“Whatever, smartass,” Ares rolls his eyes, then points a finger at Percy, leaning on the table again. It almost touches his chest. “You’re cutting it too short, Percy Jackson. Next time, I won’t be as kind. Now, your promise.”

“I promise on the River Styx to complete this quest for you,” Percy says, a little hurried and disjointed, but Ares seems satisfied with it. Thunder rumbles, and goosebumps appear on his skin. He absolutely hates this. “Is — is that all, sir?”

“Drop the formality, kid. Doesn’t look genuine,” Ares laughs, and stands up, sighing. “You’ll have to practice that if you want to live. Good luck on the quest. And, here’s your destination.”

He pulls a paper out of his pocket, folded, and throws it at the table, along with some cash. Annabeth catches it before it even touches the table. Then,



the three of them watch Ares, god of war, walk away whistling, clearly pleased with himself.

“Gods of Olympus,” Annabeth says out loud, shivering. She’s pale, and Grover isn’t looking any better. No one comes to check on them. “That... that was...”

“Awful,” Grover finishes, shivering, and looks at the remnants of his food — as in, some loose croutons from his salad. His wrap is gone, vanished into his stomach, and there’s a bite mark on his salad’s plate. “Percy, you’ve met one too many gods on this quest.”

“I’ve met too many gods period,” Percy corrects, then nudges Annabeth. She glares at him. “You’re not going to scold me about my behavior?”

“You have your vote,” Annabeth huffs, frowning. “You’re lucky Lord Ares is... crude. He’s not usually this bad, according to his kids, but I suppose they’re an exception. No other gods would take that, except perhaps Mr. D, because he’s used to it. We have to do this side quest now, though, or you’re dead *dead*.”

“Right,” Percy looks at the table, catching a whiff of the leftovers of his milkshake. His stomach churns, and he pushes at Annabeth and Grover. “Excuse me— I, uh, I need the bathroom—”

Annabeth goes a little green. “I— gods, actually, me too, Grover, move—”

Pro tip: do *not* be close to Ares, god of war, for too long, or you might forget that you didn’t always feel like choking someone and screaming, and that will, in turn, land your dinner in the toilet. He mostly dry-heaves, dizzy, but when he comes out, the waitress that served them is speaking to Annabeth outside the girls’ bathroom, handing her a water bottle between whispers.

“What was that about?” Grover asks Annabeth, when Percy brings it up, once she’s been generous enough to share some of the water with them both. Grover didn’t get so dizzy—apparently, this is nothing compared to what Mr. D can be like on a bad day—but he seems skittish, looking around

the dinner as if Ares might pop out to jumpscare them, just for good measure. “We shouldn’t be talking to mortals.”

“She was asking about Percy,” Annabeth mumbles, running a self-conscious hand through her hair. “She recognized your description, but she seemed more concerned about Ares... perhaps we should get going, guys. Get back here fast. Ares’ note says he’ll be here in two hours to pick up his stuff.”

Percy looks at the waitress that helped Annabeth, and they accidentally cross eyes. He ducks his head. “Yeah, let’s go. This blows.”

## 5. Chapter 5

### Notes for the Chapter:

so far the thing i love the most about this rewrite is how tiny percy is, thanks for coming to my tedtalk

Annabeth and Grover look like they're missing camp more than ever. For trained heroes, it seems like Percy has half the street-smarts in this team, because they couldn't for the life of them get a taxi to spend Ares' *'brat transport'* money; Percy was shocked Ares didn't make them walk. There is a perk to growing up in New York, because all it took was his own taxi whistle, once he had warmed up enough.

"Something I don't get," Percy says, as they make their way through the water park after raiding the gift shop. Percy decided to keep Annabeth's hoodie, in place of a brand new Waterland one, and he's swimming in it because she's taller and more muscular. They're heading to the Tunnel of Love, because of course they are. "Surely Lady Aphrodite doesn't have that much bad taste?"

"Romance is weird," Annabeth wrinkles her nose. "I don't get it. But love and war are two sides of the same coin, I guess, so they must be somewhat bound to be together."

"Or, Lady Aphrodite just likes leather jackets," Grover suggests, and Percy gags. He can't imagine anyone looking good in those. Except maybe his mom, in the few pictures she has from when she was younger. "Which one is more likely? Gods like weird things. Percy, did you know your dad—?"

"Nope," Percy interrupts. He doesn't want to know *anything* about his dad's taste in romance. He only needs to know he at least appreciated mom enough to make her happy for all of five seconds before he abandoned her. "Isn't Lady Aphrodite married?"

"Lots of gods are married," Annabeth shrugs. "Doesn't stop them, but Lord Hephaestus makes a game out of humiliating her and Lord Ares. Maybe

that's why their date failed— we should watch out for our surroundings at the Tunnel of Love. There might be a trap.”

They reach the edge of the tunnel's pool, and stare down at the boat. There, sitting under the moonlight, is a twinkling pink scarf, ridiculously suspicious-looking, alongside a shield. The mirrors lining the walls of the pool make Percy want to gag. Grover doesn't seem charmed either as they stand aside and let Annabeth inspect the area.

“Here!” She says, after a few more minutes—which he and Grover killed by playing rock, paper, scissors, to see who would go down into the pool; he lost—pointing to a sign under one of the cupid statues. “Lord Hephaestus's symbol. This is a trap. But, how do you activate it...? I should've listened to more of Charlie's tech classes...”

“How about we *don't* figure that out?” Percy suggests, to which Annabeth rolls her eyes. Percy eyes the pool. “Do you think I could fill it with water if I focus? Might not trigger the trap.”

“Maybe.” Annabeth shakes her head. “The only way to know is by inspecting the boat. Who's coming down with me?”

Percy sighs, long suffering. “Wanna hold my hand?”

Annabeth does him the kindness of making him approach the boat first for that joke. He can't even blame her, it was kinda awful, but still. She only steps where he steps as they slide down the walls of the pool and walk towards the boat in the center. Percy has Riptide out, just in case something jumps at them.

They reach the boat safely. Percy looks around as Annabeth inspects it, being careful not to touch anything, but she seems stumped. “I can't see anything. Surely there's something, right? Unless the trap has already been activated?”

“I doubt it,” Percy sighs. “I'm not that lucky.”

“There could be a magic trigger,” Annabeth suggests, visibly uncomfortable with the lack of a concrete answer. “If that’s the case, unless you and Grover know sorcerer-type magic...”

“We can’t avoid it,” Percy finishes, and glances at the contents of the boat, then looks around the pool. It’s too quiet, as abandoned as one can expect an ancient water park to be. He doesn’t like it at all, but they need the stuff. They can’t afford to waste time. “Should we just go for it, deal with the consequences?”

Annabeth stares at him as if she would rather actually hold his hand to go through the Tunnel of Love, which makes Percy internally cringe. Yikes. But in the end, she gives up, and nods. “Alright. But you’re taking the scarf.”

Percy gets in the boat, grabs it, and waits for something to happen. Nothing does. Annabeth huffs, as if offended that something dangerous hasn’t come to try to kill them, or whatever pranks Hephaestus likes to play on his cheating wife and jackass brother haven’t activated. She grabs the shield and frowns.

“This doesn’t seem right—” Annabeth starts, and then her eyes fall on the scarf in his hand and she yelps, stepping back in a panic. Percy jumps, because that’s the natural reaction, and looks down to see a spider crawling onto his hand. He stares, incredulous, shakes it off, then looks at her. “Oh, gods, Percy! Let’s— let’s get out of here—”

“It’s just a spider—”

He hears a low hissing sound, like a tiny metallic door being opened. Annabeth turns around, eyes wide, terrified for her life, just in time for the spiders to come not from the pool drain she’s looking at— but from the mirrors, all around them, opening like hatches and letting the things out in numbers.

“Get in the boat!” Annabeth yells, pushing him back and almost knocking him on his ass. Grover takes flight with the shoes and approaches them. Annabeth tries to grab his hand but a spider reaches her shoe, hissing. It

unexpectedly explodes, and Annabeth lets go of Grover, yelling in pain, so Percy has to hold her still. “Oh, gods, this— this was made for gods—”

“What the *hell*?” Percy asks, batting spiders away with Riptide. Annabeth grows paler as the spiders close in on them. Percy notices, with no small amount of apprehension, that their vaguely bronze tone isn’t the result of nature being creative— it *is* celestial bronze. Shit. “Annabeth, do they hurt —”

“*What do you think?!*” Annabeth yells at him, shaking as she tries batting spiders away with her dagger, but it’s no use. “This is a trap made for gods, Percy— that thing went right through my shoe—”

“Annabeth, you need to stay calm!” Grover yells from above, lowering himself again and stretching his hand out to her. “You should get out first —”

This is when the net decides to make its presence known. Grover almost gets caught in it, but Annabeth sees it and pushes him away. She manages to get him out of the line of fire in time as it closes above the whole width of the pool, trapping them in. The cupid statues move, pointing their arrows at them, and cameras spring up. A mechanical voice starts counting down, saying something about a transmission to Olympus.

“I’m killing Ares,” Percy says, trying to cut through the net, but it’s no use. By now, he’s noticed that not all the spiders are explosive, but their bites hurt, opening tiny bleeding wounds on their skin. If they don’t get out soon, they might just die from a million papercuts. It looks worse than it sounds. “Annabeth, how can we—”

“I don’t know!” She replies instantly, sticking her back to his own so they can have a full view of the situation. “I— I don’t like spiders!”

“I can tell!” Percy grunts back, but he’s not too fond of these ones, either. The way they crawl over his clothes and take chunks out of his skin makes his grip on his sword weak, not that it was actually helping that much. One of the exploding spiders manages to sneak up his leg, bursting against his

calf, and he holds back a yelp— crap, Annabeth is not being dramatic. They need to get out.

He looks around, trying to come up with an idea, but he's got nothing. He looks deeper into the tunnel, trying to see how far the net reaches, and sees a little opening— okay. Okay, they can try that.

“Annabeth, don't panic,” he tries to warn her, but she yells at another spider that's made it to her shoulder, and Percy swats it away. “We need to get to that opening, and you're not gonna like it. Grover, wait for us up there!”

He grabs her by the wrist and pulls her off the boat, to which she screams louder. They make their way to the net opening only to be greeted by more spiders. Percy himself screams, but mostly in rage, and Ares better watch his back or Percy's going to lose it the next time he sees him. He hits as many spiders as he can, then Percy tries to grab the net to test whether they can climb through the opening— only to get shocked.

Electricity runs through his body and Annabeth yells again as he staggers backwards, falling on his ass, shaking. He's dropped Riptide, his hand is burned, and everything is fuzzy for a worryingly long time. When he comes back to, Annabeth's dragged him back to the boat and wrapped Aphrodite's scar around his palm, where the burn is, and is swabbing spiders as best as she can.

“I'll never say this again!” Annabeth starts, as Percy sits up. “But I'm sorry for freaking out!”

Percy's mouth feels dry and numb, and he tries to say *wow, did that hurt*, but all that comes out is gibberish. Then, a spider crawls on his leg and takes a bite, and the pain makes his head a little clearer. “I think my plan failed.”

“Water,” Annabeth says, shaking her head. “You were right. Except we now know that the net is electric.”

“I can keep us dry,” Percy suggests, with more confidence than he feels, but it seems like their only choice. “I don't know how we actually get out,

though.”

“We shoot up with the boat!” Annabeth points with Riptide at the net opening. “You had the right idea. It’s going to be a close one, Percy. We need to be precise. Can you do it?”

Percy huffs out a breath, wincing at another spider bite. “I don’t have any choice, so, count me in.”

It’s messy. Focusing on making the pipes burst is the easy part, controlling the water is harder. As the pool starts filling up, it’s harder for the spiders to come for them, and they soon start short-circuiting. He gains confidence, and the water speeds up with it— too much, actually.

“Slow down!” Annabeth screams, but Percy’s control isn’t that good; they lurch, almost stopping altogether, and the water level rises, bringing them dangerously close to the net. “Percy, don’t you dare turn this into a second trap!”

“I’m working on it!” Which is true, since he manages some sense of control, but it’s slippery. As they approach the end of the tunnel, he realizes that they’ll have to jump, because there’s no way the boat will fit through that. “Hey, any chance you got this math down?!”

“I do!”

It’s not fun, though it probably looks like it. The fall to the cement threatens to dislocate his ankle and Annabeth lets out a few curse words that would make any proper New Yorker proud as she lands on her elbow, while Grover profusely apologizes. The attraction keeps filling with water, until Percy’s able to let go, just short of touching the net. Spiders float, dead, and the cupids have turned their cameras towards them, blinking red dots indicating the live feed.

*Give them a show*, Percy tells himself, and grabs Aphrodite’s stupid scarf, slowly standing. Annabeth looks at him, as bleeding, smoked, and in pain as he is, holding Ares’ shield with a confused expression, but Percy just sighs, waves the scarf at the cupids, and goes:



“It’s been an honor, Lady Aphrodite,” he would go for a smile, but he knows he looks like a punk either way, so he settles for a nod of acknowledgement. “See you all at the trial.”

The blinking red dots go off, the cameras retreat, and the cupids turn to their original positions. Annabeth clears her throat. “Well, that was an attempt.”

“I had to do *something*,” Percy shrugs, and Grover agrees with a nervous bleat. “You guys ok?”

“I’m peachy,” Grover supplies, digging into his backpack to pull out Waterland themed band-aids. “So... does anyone want some first aid?”

“Give me that,” Annabeth snaps, back to frowning and scowling and being herself and reminding Percy how utterly unpleasant she is. Grover throws the box at her and she tears the top open, dropping a handful on the ground before tossing it to Percy. “It *had* to be spiders. Why spiders? Is this a sign? Surely, otherwise, why would...”

Seemingly realizing she’s talking to herself, Annabeth shuts up and starts slowly cleaning her cuts with a towel from the water park before bandaging them. Percy does the same. There’s not much they can do about the burns without ointment or bandages, but Percy figures that he’ll be fine the second he manages to get his hands on some water.

“That sucked,” Percy says, as Grover pulls out his reed pipes. He holds back a wince. “Uh, is it really time for that?”

“I’ll play a healing song,” Grover explains, but hesitates as he brings the pipes up to his lips, looking at Annabeth. “Do you have some change on you?”

Annabeth digs into her pocket and tosses a drachma at Grover, who whispers something under his breath at the coin before launching it in the air. It disappears. Percy blinks as Grover lets out a relieved sigh. “Ah, thank you, Lord Apollo, Lady Artemis. I thought it’d be too little...”

Before Percy can ask, Grover starts playing, and his body is suddenly filled with energy. He straightens up in surprise, but Annabeth instead hunches over a little more, and the burns in her arms— both the ones from Medusa and the spiders— start looking a lot better, and her remaining visible cuts close a little. The same seems to be happening to him. Grover is out of breath before it can go any further, however, and tips over sideways with apparent exhaustion. Percy catches him before he can hit his head on the concrete.

“What was that?” Percy asks. Grover sighs dreamily.

“I offered the drachma to Lady Artemis and Lord Apollo for some luck with the song,” he sits up slightly. “Healing songs are really draining, since they use your own energy... especially if you’re not close to nature, and especially if you’re a satyr. If they hadn’t taken the coin, my song probably wouldn’t have even tickled.”

Percy blinks. “Whoa. Thank you, man. You didn’t need to.”

“We’re a team,” Grover shrugs, pocketing his pipes. “You guys were cool out there. Had to help you back somehow.”

“You caught us,” Annabeth clears her throat. She seems uncomfortable, not looking Grover in the eyes. He’s noticed they do this a lot: they don’t speak to each other unless they have to and it’s always practical when they do. Percy guesses having Thalia die on them was... well, it had its consequences. “That was enough.”

Grover snuffles a little and Percy hates to break the moment—though maybe not as much as he should—but they need to leave. “We should get going. Ares is waiting.”

“Right,” Annabeth nods, sitting up and raising her chin. She glances at the scarf in his hands. “Be careful with that. Could be enchanted.”

Percy’s ADHD brain has no better idea to test that than to bring it up to his nose to smell it. He catches the faint aroma of mountain laurel, but otherwise, it seems rather inoffensive. “Eh, that was kinda underwhelming.”

“You’re an idiot,” Annabeth rolls her eyes, and tries to snatch the scarf from his hand, but Percy moves away. She blinks. “What?”

“I’ll carry it,” Percy shrugs. He isn’t sure why, but after that little goodbye he gave to the broadcast—and oh, he’s angry about it, just not quite done processing *how much*—he feels like it’d be best to keep it with him. “It’s fine. The thing barely smells, and I think any perfume wore off, or Lady Aphrodite just likes walking through trees. Here, Grover, test it.”

“Percy! Don’t—!”

He shoves the scarf at Grover’s sensitive satyr nose and, on autopilot, Grover inhales— only for his eyes to go wide and his jaw to go slack, a dopey smile appearing on his face. Oh. That’s not good. “Hmm, trees...”

“Dumbass!” Annabeth yells at him, and goes for the scarf again as Grover lets out a dreamy sigh, swaying side to side like he’s dancing to a song in his head. Percy leans back from Annabeth’s grab. “Percy, don’t be ridiculous—”

“Okay, okay, I was wrong! It is enchanted!” He stands up to pull Grover up with him, Annabeth following but not offering a helping hand. “It could affect you too, I better keep it! How long do you think he’ll be like this?”

Annabeth stares at him like she wants to punch him in the gut. Percy can admit, this once, that he did a very stupid thing, and probably deserves it, but still. Rude. “Well, usually Lady Aphrodite’s own magic is much stronger— as in, fall in love with the first thing you come across, strong. This just seems to have... doped him up a bit. Satyrs like dryads, and there’s this Juniper that makes eyes at Grover all day, so—”

“Annabeth,” Percy counts to ten in his head. “Just answer the question.”

“An hour, maybe less,” she shrugs. “I’m not a magic expert. You need a daughter of Aphrodite for that.”

*Like Silena*, Percy bites back, *who would’ve been just as, if not more, useful than you, clearly*. But he dispels the nasty thoughts. Annabeth’s a jerk, but

at least she can get things done. He'd probably be spider food right now if she hadn't recovered her bearings after he got electrocuted, so he's gonna cut her some slack, this once.

Percy ties the scarf around his wrist and manages to catch another taxi. When the driver asks for more money than they have because he thinks he can steal from three kids, Percy shoves his wrist against the guy's face fast yet long enough for him to breath in, get doopey, and just take Ares' exact taxi fare. Ugh. If this was New York, Percy would've probably called him a few names for good measure, but he supposes that he should save the words for Ares' ugly mug.

Speaking of, Ares seems *delighted* when they find him leaning against his bike in the diner's parking lot. "Heroes! You're back. Well done. Did the spider bites hurt? Did you kids have fun?"

Annabeth seems to visibly hold back her thoughts about the spiders, even as she gives Ares his shield back, so Percy has to answer. "They exploded, you know. Not exactly fun."

"Oh, I saw. Lovely program," Ares snickers, and glances at Percy's wrist. His expression tightens up, fury flaring in his eyes. "Haven't you been told that you shouldn't borrow other people's things without asking, punk?"

Percy blinks. "Oh, right. Here, you can—"

Ares grabs him by the wrist and Percy's mind enters fight or flight, the same way it did when Gabe did similar things, and he freezes up. Ares' grab is unrelenting, rough enough that it starts hurting, at first not that much and then to the point where he has to grit his teeth, as he unties the scarf from his wrist and then pushes him away, making him stumble back.

He doesn't seem to have noticed at all, and when he looks over at Percy, who's hyperventilating and shaking, he seems vaguely disgusted. "You're lucky my girl won't mind your mortal scent all over it. Otherwise, I would've gutted you right here. However, I suppose a deal is a deal— you have my vote, kid. And here's your stuff."

He grabs a backpack resting on top of his bike and throws it at Grover, who almost trips in order to catch it. Percy can't get his tongue to move, so when Ares raises an eyebrow at him, Annabeth has to clear her throat.

"Thank you, Lord Ares. We won't forget your generosity," Annabeth nudges him, subtly, and Percy manages to nod, eyes falling to the ground. He doesn't want to see what self-satisfied face Ares is making right now. "You did mention a transport, my Lord?"

"Oh, yeah. Almost forgot," Ares huffs, and Percy hears him getting on his bike, turning the ignition. "See that truck over there? It'll take you straight to L.A., with one stop in Vegas. You got ten minutes before it leaves. Good riddance, kids. Don't die too fast— that kind of death is always boring."

Grover has to pull Percy back from the bike by the edge of his shirt, getting him out of the way. It is only after he can't hear the thing at all that Percy is able to take a deep breath, lift his head, and look at his quest partners again. Annabeth avoids his eyes. Grover's lip is wobbling, but he's hesitant.

"You okay, man?" He asks, and Percy nods, taking the backpack from Ares when he offers it. It's surprisingly heavy, and a quick opening of it reveals Oreos, some ambrosia squares, and a little cash. What a jackass. "Uh, Percy..."

"I'm fine," his voice comes out dry, so Percy clears his throat, looking at them and purposely avoiding glancing at his throbbing wrist, even though he can feel Annabeth's eyes on it. "What's our transport, again?"

So, animal cruelty sucks. They spend most of the ride in silence, tired, after making sure the animals ate properly. But at some point Annabeth stops frowning at herself, seemingly having another of those conversations on her own, and looks at Percy with an eyebrow raised.

"Did Luke say anything else, Percy?" She asks, and it makes him want to bang his head against the side of the truck. "Anything useful? This quest... things are strange. Lord Ares implied he was the one that pointed the finger at Hades, for the sake of chaos, but this quest he gave us... the price we all paid... it seems off."

“Luke’s answers were weird,” Percy shrugs, looking around. His eyes settle on Annabeth’s camp beads—Lee had explained them to him, and he vaguely wonders if he’ll live long enough to get one—and he notices a university graduation ring hanging alongside them. He decides to ignore it. It’s not really his business. “He... said some stuff about you, I guess—”

“He did?” Annabeth asks a little too fast and too excited, blushing when she realizes her outburst. “I mean, what did he say?”

Percy looks at Grover, who seems just as curious, and considers lying. Considers not popping Annabeth’s innocent bubble and letting her have her crush on Luke. But then he remembers the way Luke’s fingers had dug into his shoulders, into Silena’s, and shakes his head.

“He implied you could’ve stolen the bolt,” he says, and gets no response. Bringing his eyes up, he meets Annabeth’s gaze, and finds a furious expression. “Hey, I wasn’t—”

“Luke wouldn’t say that. Are you crazy?” Annabeth huffs, crossing her arms, and Percy exchanges a look with Grover, who seems baffled. “We’ve known each other forever, Percy. He would never—”

“That’s what he implied,” Percy interrupts, frowning. “Then he went back on his word. He didn’t mean to say it. The point is, he also thinks it’s Hades, because his exact words were that someone would have to be invisible—”

“Are you sure it wasn’t just you who assumed it was me?” Annabeth shoots back at him, and Percy stares at her. “You did, didn’t you?”

“I’ve known you for less than a month, why would I think it was you? Why would I assume it was anyone I’ve met so far?” Percy points out, and Annabeth scoffs. “He said your name first, not me—”

“Of course he did,” Annabeth rolls her eyes, seemingly done with the conversation, even though they should probably discuss this stuff about Hades, because he agrees that this isn’t right. There’s something off. “So,

Luke thinks it was Hades too, so maybe Ares just happened to be on the right track—”

“Hey, don’t go back on your gut instinct just because of Luke, this all seems a little convenient—” Percy starts saying, and Annabeth slaps him on the back of the head. He stares at her, mouth dropping open. “Are you *five*? What the actual fuck, Annabeth?”

She blushes, like she didn’t realize how childish that was, but doesn’t apologize. “Don’t say stupid things just because you don’t like Luke, Percy! He’s complicated! Not everyone has it easy at home like you!”

A hush falls over the three of them, and the animals shift with unease. Anger washes over him like a wave and Percy bites back all the cruel words he’d like to say, all the ugly truths he’s seen, because he has a feeling that, if he starts, he won’t be able to stop. Instead, he looks at Grover, crossing his arms, boiling. He half-hopes they run across some monster when they stop in Vegas, for the sake of blowing off steam.

“Guys,” Grover starts, frowning, looking between the two of them. “This isn’t cool. We’re supposed to be a team—”

“Right, just like we were a team with Thalia,” Annabeth snaps out, apparently not able to swallow her own poison like Percy is, and it shuts Grover up extremely fast. Percy stares at Annabeth in disbelief. “You had one job, Grover, and you guided us wrong, so you’re not one to talk about teamwork here. Pull your own weight.”

Percy thinks back to that moment at Waterland, how Annabeth had reluctantly comforted Grover and how touched Grover had been. His previous fury evaporates and leaves him empty when he realizes that Annabeth is snapping because of Luke. Because of how much she trusts him, blindly. He replays Annabeth’s words, *you had one job, pull your own weight*, and wonders how much of that is her, and how much of that is something that Luke, angry and repressed, told to her in private in order to shape her mind in his favor. He recalls Luke’s sharp smile, when Silena reminded him that he was the one that got quests banned and how insistent Annabeth was about getting one, the bitterness in his tone when he asked

about his father. And Annabeth, in Medusa's place, trying to say that she wants to do quests for her own sake, for her own fate.

How she speaks of and, apparently, to her mother. Luke, Athena, Annabeth. Thalia, in a tree, because she ignored Athena's advice to pledge herself to Zeus. What is this? Who's manipulating and guilt-tripping who? Why would Luke, however accidentally or not, point out that Annabeth has a tool from her mother that would be ideal to steal Zeus' glorified stick? Does he want to blame Athena for the missing bolt, yet has no evidence for it? What game is he playing?

It's too much. He's missing too many pieces, and he's not about to guide Annabeth through her own soul-searching to see who's playing her better as a puppet: Luke, or her mother. Which one of them actually has her good intentions at heart? Gods have their own agendas and, from the couple myths he's read, Athena doesn't seem to be the type of goddess to just give her children tools out of the goodness of her heart. She has to have something planned for Annabeth. And Luke... Luke probably knows, and wants to steer her away from it. Make her fail at it if he has to.

Fuck, he just gave himself a headache. He needs to focus on his own issues.

"Apologize," he says, in the end, because that's the most important thing right now. "Annabeth, apologize to Grover. You didn't mean that."

She doesn't say anything for a while, but eventually, she moves away from her sitting place, falls next to Grover, and stares blankly ahead. "I'm sorry. That wasn't fair. But we all need to play a part here. Keep doing what you did in the water-park."

That's better. That sounds more like Annabeth, like a reasonable one—the Annabeth that thinks of a trap, checks it, confirms it, and then knocks herself out of her stupor when she realizes no one will save her if she doesn't react herself. Percy still doesn't like her; that Annabeth is just as entitled, just as self-centered, just as prideful. But at least she doesn't sound like she's regurgitating words that were fed to her by some manipulative liar with a nice tan.



He goes to sleep after that, not wanting to see Annabeth or Grover's expression, whatever that might be. He'll reassure him later, about how much he has helped him, how glad he is his friend, and that he volunteered for the quest. For now... he needs a nap.

In his dreams, he sees Thalia.

"Well," she says, nodding at her straightjacket. "You have some odd ones, don't you, pal?"

Percy blinks. "What?"

"Your dreams," Thalia rolls her eyes, electric blue. Her hair is cropped short to her head, punk style, and there's a scattering of freckles all over her face. She looks older than he pictured. "I didn't bring myself here just to sit in a bad dream, Percy Jackson. Are you just gonna stare?"

"Is this— are you real?" Percy asks, trying not to let his jaw fall to the floor. Thalia rolls her eyes and nods. "But aren't you—?"

"A pine tree," Thalia shrugs. "Hey, we get around, too. I knew some Mist magic bullshit before my dear old man decided he wasn't enjoying my rebellious phase. And your mind is hard to get into, by the way, which is good. You'll need that. You're strong."

"Uh, thanks?" Percy pauses. "So... why are you here?"

"It's about your quest," Thalia hums, and Percy sits up straighter. She snorts, shooting him a sharp smile. "Trees hear things, but I can't give you every answer. You've been told not to trust the gifts. Remember that. Trust your gut. With gods, always do. If something ain't right, fix it."

"Okay," Percy nods, even though he has no idea what to make of that yet. "I... thank you? For seeing me? I don't know how you're doing this, but—"

"I told you, magic. Nature magic. Not all immortals are trash, apparently. Some of them look cool in the moonlight," Thalia interrupts him with a

wink, but then she tilts her head, as if hearing something he can't, and her smile falls. "About Luke—"

As if the name triggered something in his brain, the dream changes. The last thing he sees of Thalia is her eyes widening in surprise and a series of curses leaving her lips. He distinguishes her mouthing, *don't forget, Percy!*

And then he's at the chasm again, listening to that voice— and someone else. They're speaking about an exchange and Percy keeps quiet as terror grips him, rather preferring to go back to hanging out with Thalia in a straightjacket. But he's noticed anyways, and the image the voice shows him of his mother is different: she's in a cell, laying on the ground with seeds next to her. Her clothes are different. She looks pale, frail, but she's breathing. Fear that she doesn't have much left runs his spine, leaving him shaky.

Something in his gut tells him she's in the Underworld and no matter how off the idea of Hades being guilty feels, he knows he has to go anyway. He has to face him. Thalia and Queen Amphitrite told him not to trust the gifts, to trust his gut, but his mom isn't a price he's willing to pay. There has to be a way to reason with Hades.

Otherwise, he doesn't know what he'll do.

## 6. Chapter 6

### Notes for the Chapter:

i think this is one of my favorite chapters so far, followed by the next one, so i hope you enjoy!

Once he gets home—because he *will* get home, with his mom—Percy's gonna go to the local library, get on a computer, and leave a shit review on the Lotus Hotel and Casino's website. And Yelp! And Google Reviews. And, everywhere he can find, really.

He didn't even wanna go in. The whole place gave him a bad vibe and he couldn't see the appeal that Annabeth and Grover did, to the point where they were practically drooling. But after such a bad night of sleep in the back of that truck, plus the remaining tension of the argument they all had, Percy figured it wouldn't hurt. But it did. It hurt them for exactly five days straight.

At first, Percy felt off. His instinct kept telling him to get out, so he started looking for Annabeth and Grover, but the hotel manager found *him* first and had spoken to him in such a sweet, sweet voice that reminded him of Silena and his mom, that he felt compelled to stop stressing out and just... enjoy himself.

“You’ve worked so hard,” the hotel manager patted his shoulder, and Percy nodded along. He *had* worked hard, hadn’t he? He was still frustrated from their interaction with Ares, and his mind wouldn’t stop swirling with thoughts of the quest making him sick. “You deserve a break! Why don’t you try out our games? We got cooking simulators, an area for virtual reality, and raising kitties...”

It was nice. She guided him by the shoulder and personally put the controls in his hands. She hovered over Percy for an amount of time that he couldn’t pin-point, and then left him alone with a self-satisfied nod. For a while, she succeeded at making Percy blend in.

But then he ran across a pair of siblings speaking Italian who *insisted* to him that they'd never been happier than in the hotel, and it was better than facing the war. When he asked which war, they couldn't remember. Needless to say, that had freaked him out enough to snap him out of it. Now, they have less than twenty-four hours to finish the quest.

Great.

“You got charmspoken,” Annabeth is saying, as if that wasn't obvious. She frowns at him with scientific curiosity that makes him uncomfortable. “You seem to be decently resistant to enchantments, but charmspeak has always been trickier magic...”

“Doesn't matter now,” Percy runs a hand through his hair, and glares at Annabeth when she shoves Ares' backpack at him. He remembers Thalia and Queen Amphitrite's warning, and wants nothing to do with it. They had managed to use a LotusCash card to secure a taxi all the way to L.A., but that did nothing to untangle the knot in his stomach. “Queen Amphitrite is gonna kill me. She's probably been in Santa Monica for days.”

“If she's even still there,” Grover provides unhelpfully, and when he sees Percy's expression he winces. “Sorry, man.”

“Your dreams are more concerning,” Annabeth curls her lips downwards, looking out the window. “You saw Lord Hades' throne room now... but that pit you keep seeing...”

“I hope it's Lord Hades now,” Grover says, reading his mind. “It'd... it'd be better than anything that lives in a pit in the Underworld. At least his wife won't be home, then we'd be really doomed!”

“There are some silver linings,” Annabeth sighs. “So, the servant—maybe he sent a thief? Let them borrow his helmet?”

“Right, but remember the Furies,” Percy points out. Something about the word thief makes him uncomfortable, and reminds him of Luke's words. How he had pointed the finger the same way Ares did. He doesn't want to jump to conclusions, though. Luke is a jackass, but there's no way he's...

whatever you need to be to be behind any of this. “They weren’t looking just for *me*. They were looking for something. If he has the bolt, then why —?”

“We need to speak to Lord Hades,” Annabeth takes a deep breath. She doesn’t look happy. Percy wonders if maybe she’s starting to see the same things he is, and that’s why she seems to be having a hard time. “Perhaps he... won’t be that mad at us, and we can discuss things?”

“Discuss things,” Grover deadpans, looking terrified. “With the Lord of the Underworld. Okay. We’re doomed.”

“Let’s be optimistic,” Percy suggests, even though he doesn’t feel like being optimistic. He looks down at Ares’ backpack, an idea brewing in his head. “Maybe if we explain our suspicions he’ll be willing to help figure this out.”

“And if he’s guilty? If his thief just lost the bolt, and he thinks you have it now?” Annabeth asks, looking like she hates doing so, but needs to. Percy can’t blame her for that. “What then?”

Percy leans back on his seat. “We’ll cross that bridge when we get there.”

“Doesn’t help he has your mom,” Grover says, and even Annabeth throws him a scandalized look. “Sorry! It’s just— this is bad!”

“Optimism,” Percy shakes his head, staring straight ahead. “Optimism, you evil goat.”

He doesn’t know exactly how he knows this, but the second he steps into the water at Santa Monica, he can tell Queen Amphitrite is not happy with him. The mako shark that leads him deeper doesn’t try to speak to him, visibly feeling uneasy, but Percy pets it as carefully as he can, and it seems to appreciate that. He never thought he’d be petting a shark in his life, yet here he is, trying to make one a little less nervous.

Queen Amphitrite is speaking to another lady that seems to be made of water when he arrives. They look distinctly alike, but as Percy watches, the

other lady's form flickers, before it completely disappears. Letting out what seems to be a disappointed sigh, Queen Amphitrite turns to Percy, and her neutral expression turns into one of indignation as she straightens up her back.

"Ah, finally," she says, her tone as unimpressed as her eyes are, while she looks him up and down. Percy winces. "I thought you'd died in a hole somewhere, Percy Jackson, never to be seen again."

"Uh, worse, actually?" Percy provides, and Queen Amphitrite tilts her head as if wanting an explanation. Percy shifts awkwardly. "Did you know there's this magic hotel in Vegas—?"

"A hotel with magic you should be immune to, correct," Queen Amphitrite raises her eyebrows. "Unless you were caught and specifically targeted?"

"Something like that," Percy shrugs. After a beat of silence, he breaks under the pressure of her gaze. "I'm sorry— I, I wasn't expecting it. My quest partners were tired—"

"Rest," Queen Amphitrite interrupts. She isn't being unkind, but she's not being forgiving, either. "Is important. Especially in high-danger situations, and quests like your own. *However*, your instincts are your best weapon, Perseus. Don't let yourself be led astray. Trust them. You won't be making this mistake twice, will you?"

Percy swallows. Damn, this isn't fair. He's only met Queen Amphitrite, but she knows exactly what kind of tone to use to make Percy behave without making him instantly angry. "No. I won't, ma'am."

"Good," Queen Amphitrite nods, not pushing him. Percy finds himself appreciating her taking his words for their value, though he knows that if he falls for a trick like that again, she probably won't be this kind about it next time. "I was just speaking to one of my sisters. She brought news from your father."

"Oh," Percy shrinks into himself, and Queen Amphitrite approaches him. She lifts his chin with soft, cold fingers, until their eyes meet. Percy gets the

message, crystal clear: he should never put himself in such a vulnerable position again, least of all in her presence. “Nothing good?”

“Your disappearance angered him and concerned him in equal measures,” Queen Amphitrite drops her hand, and her spear manifests from the water, just for her to drum her nails against its shaft. She eyes the tip and then directs her gaze at Percy like she’s considering whether he’d make a good catch. “Without you, there’s war. Simple as that. And beyond it, Perseus, your future has already been foretold. It’ll be as great as it will be tragic, boy. Your father will not leave you out of his sight, nor have you knocking on the doors of Elysium before your time.”

“You mean before his plans for me come true,” Percy says, his tone factual, almost deadpan. There’s anger under it, because he still can’t believe that the man that’s supposed to be his *father* can’t even say all to him. “If he’s so concerned, why does he have you as his messenger? Can’t he at least say that stuff to my face?”

Queen Amphitrite’s eyes flash, but gathers control of herself and frowns down at him. “You misunderstand, boy. Your father is preparing his army as we speak, and so is his brother. And believe me, Perseus, you do *not* want to meet your father as he prepares for war. The sea is unforgiving, even to its own.”

“But—”

“The pressure that his presence or that of any Olympian god could put upon you right now would crush you before you even had a moment to process it,” Queen Amphitrite pauses, an eyebrow raised at him. “Like I said before, I’m doing your father a favor. You two will speak when the time comes. And if Lord Zeus thinks you a thief, it is best that your father avoids you. Time is of the essence, so abandon your personal matters, and focus on your mission.”

“Easier said than done,” Percy lets out, bitter, without meaning to. He crosses his arms when Queen Amphitrite throws him a questioning look. Percy hesitates, then decides that he might as well just say it, because he’s likely to be dead before the day is over anyways. “He’s a god that probably

has hundreds of kids, even if they aren't demigods. I have one dad. And from the sounds of it, he expects me to save his neck just because I'll die if I don't, but even if I do, I could die anyways. I'm only doing this for my mom, and because a war wouldn't be cool anyways. Innocent people shouldn't suffer because of a glorified toy fight."

Percy expects Queen Amphitrite to be angry, perhaps even offended. Instead, her gaze softens, and it throws him for a loop. "You're not one of many, Perseus. None of your father's children are—even the monsters, the accidents, the mistakes. Once more, until you get it: the sea is unrelenting, possessive, all-consuming. Not that different from love, in the end. And all that belongs to the sea, *will* return to the sea. Your father might be distant, Percy, but don't ever think he won't reward you, or acknowledge you."

"I don't want a reward," Percy snaps out. "And I know he knows that I exist. He claimed me. I want a real father. I want a reason not to hate him for doing what he did with mom, knowing he couldn't stay with her."

Queen Amphitrite sets a hand on his shoulder, her eyes soft like the waves that hit the shore, but the strength of her grip speaks of a storm. "I'm sorry, Percy. But he'll never be what you want. He is not ours to control, and, despite how it might seem, you're not ours to control either. Inside you, there's the ocean. You will never be shackled, and he won't resent your hate, if that's how you feel. Remember that. Even if other people think they have you—they never will."

He ignores the burning in his eyes, blinking it away. "What are we to each other, then? What *should* we be?"

"He's your king, as he is mine," Queen Amphitrite squeezes his shoulder again, then lets it go, stepping back. Percy raises his head to look at her, and finds, to his surprise, a hint of approval in her expression. "And you'll do your *duty*, Perseus, and be his prince, his warrior, and his hero. You may not be my son, but he's claimed you. When you come to Atlantis, it's only a matter of time before everyone sees it as such, as well. Do not fret. If you can get through the solstice, there'll be a lot to come your way as a show of our gratitude."



“The solstice,” Percy repeats, and then jumps. “Crap—we’re sitting here talking, but—”

“Don’t worry,” Queen Amphitrite glances up at the surface, even though no light reaches this deep down. “You are on time, still. Have you decided what to do about the gifts you were given, Percy?”

He hesitates. “I think so, yeah?”

Queen Amphitrite raises an eyebrow and tilts her head at him without saying a word. Percy blushes, clears his throat, and rephrases that. “Yeah, I know what to do. Well— I’ll try. Hopefully I won’t die.”

“That’s better,” she nods, though it seems like she wants to pull his ear and make him try again instead. Then, she reaches into a pocket in her dress, and pulls out three pearls, large and blue and shining. Percy stares. “When you’re in the Underworld, these might be helpful, if you find yourself in need of a quick way out. You just have to smash them at your feet. Now, this gift is my own. For free.”

Percy was extending his hand out for the pearls, up until she said that. He freezes midway. “From you? Free help? Won’t my father—?”

“Your father approved, so don’t worry about that,” Queen Amphitrite reaches out and presses the pearls into his hand, then takes her hand back before Percy can give them back. They feel heavier than they look, swirling in blue. He stares at her, wide-eyed, and Queen Amphitrite actually grins at him. “I’ve taken a bit of a liking to you, Perseus, which isn’t something I say often about my husband’s offspring. You all can be... such a handful. But I see potential in you. I wish to make you my champion, if all goes well once you come back to the surface.”

His jaw drops open. “Your champion?”

“Focus on your quest for now,” Queen Amphitrite steps back, sighing, but there’s a slight twitch to her lips as she takes in Percy’s expression again. “We shall speak again... hopefully. Good luck, Perseus. And don’t forget —”

“What belongs to the sea will always return to the sea,” he says, and catches the approval in Queen Amphitrite’s eyes, before she vanishes in a swirl of water. He stands there, for a second, too shocked to react, and then the mako shark from before nudges him, and Percy snaps into action.

Wow. That... that probably sums up his feelings really well. Queen Amphitrite might just turn out to be the best stepmom ever.

“How did it go?” Grover asks the second that he’s outside the water, glancing over at him as if to make sure he didn’t somehow get into a fight with Queen Amphitrite. “All cool?”

“She was angry,” Percy nods, and Annabeth seems to dislike that, judging by her expression, probably mostly out of the idea of pissing off any god than anything else. “But she gave me something that might help later. Hopefully we won’t need it, though.”

“Alright,” Annabeth hands him back Ares’ backpack, and honestly, Percy can’t wait to get rid of it. It’s gotten heavier and heavier with time, and he’s afraid of what he’ll find when he opens it again. “We got the address, right?”

“It’s some music studio, yeah,” Percy squints. “Do you know your way around? Or should we just spend our money on a cab?”

Annabeth frowns. “Cab. I wasn’t born with my sibling’s skill to make their way through cities. Let’s go.”

Percy refrains, just barely, from asking if that means her siblings are smarter than her after all. Probably wouldn’t do well for team spirit, now that they’re about to go to the Underworld.

Watching the news report on him and his run-away friends isn’t exactly fun, especially as Gabe’s fake grief makes him grind his teeth and want to break something. He gets his outlet for his fury when they end up at Crusty’s.

“Little brother!” Crusty says, stopping himself in the middle of his tour of the store as if suddenly struck by an idea. Or, rather—recognition. Percy

turns around, *praying* that he means Grover, but nope. Not his luck. “I knew I recognized that smell! Have we met before? When were you born?”

Percy blinks. “Doesn't matter. You were talking about waterbeds—?”

He should've just answered the question. After Annabeth and Grover get peer-pressured into trying out the beds and subsequently start getting stretched, and a clever bit of manipulation, Percy stands over Crusty, holding Riptide to his neck as he looks for something to keep his mouth shut so he won't escape.

“What is this, brother?!” Crusty screams. Percy grabs several pamphlets describing the wonders of having a memory foam mattress and shoves them inside Crusty's mouth. His protests become muffled sounds, and after he frees his companions, Annabeth starts explaining what he used to get up to in ancient times.

“That's my brother,” Percy says, out loud, and then shivers in disgust. “Why?”

“I told you,” Grover pats his back. “Your father got up to weird stuff.”

*No shit*, Percy thinks, and then does the thing that feels logical and cuts his brother's head off. It doesn't feel good. Crusty doesn't dissolve into dust, just like the hellhound and Medusa. He's starting to think the Minotaur was an odd stroke of luck, or the result of Hades fetching the monster specifically to target him. And if Queen Amphitrite meant what she said, then Crusty is as valuable as he is in his father's eyes, even if the imminent war might give Percy an edge.

He hopes Poseidon doesn't get mad about this, but, as they empty the register of money—they don't know how many more cabs they'll take, after all—he finds that he has a hard time regretting it. The splattering of ichor on his clothes from killing Crusty makes that feeling hard to set in, because at least he'll regenerate, eventually. If Percy gets his head cut off, he doesn't get another try. This unsettling realization and the map for DOA Recording Studios is all he gets from this brotherly visit, and he vows to never suffer through it again.

Before they enter DOA, Grover sets a hand on his shoulder. “Okay. It’ll be fine. Everything’s cool. We have an escape plan.”

“I’m sorry I dragged you into this, for what is worth,” Percy sighs, trying to not give away how nervous and terrified he actually is. He’s realizing very, very fast, that questing successfully keeps his mind occupied and centered on a single goal. It really is made for his ADHD. But all that adrenaline has made him feel disconnected from emotions other than anger and fear, and he’s already so, so tired. “I can’t imagine what this must feel like to you. Thank you for coming with me.”

Grover’s lip wobbles and he sniffles. “Percy—”

“We should go in,” Annabeth cuts in, crossing her arms. She looks apprehensive, but there’s a hint of excitement in her eyes that makes Percy feel a little disgusted. He doesn’t doubt Annabeth is scared, too—her face is pale and her shoulders too tense, but she’s embracing it instead of doing what Percy is; barely holding on to his motivation and energy. “The sooner we get this over with... the better.”

Percy sends her an annoyed look but Annabeth seems to not care about arguing with him now that she’s come this far. He can’t help but think that she might be acting a little too cocky for the situation, but he decides to keep his mouth shut.

They go in.

“You look familiar,” Charon comments, squinting down at him after putting him through a spelling bee round because of his dyslexia picking the wrong time to make him say something dumb. “Did one of the grumpy-grumps upstairs finally catch you and put you to death, Percy Jackson?”

“You know my name?” Percy blinks, genuinely taken aback. He goes through the whole quest in his head and realizes, with shock, that almost every monster they’ve encountered already knew his name before he said it. That’s... odd. “Why—?”

“That broadcast was fire,” Charon plays with his rings, chuckling. Percy scowls. “How may I help you, little ones? Are you dead or not?”

“Not yet, sir,” Annabeth chimes in, looking not at all amused. Percy fears she might try to wrestle Charon. “We’re here to go to the Underworld.”

Charon whistles. “So you *want* to die?”

“No!” Grover blurts out, and Charon throws an unimpressed eyebrow his way. His voice becomes squeaky. “Uh, no, sir, we’re just—”

“Listen, kids, let’s not get cocky,” Charon interrupts, and his chill, relaxed aura changes as he scowls down at them. He bares his teeth slightly and shows off way-too-sharp canines. The ghost-looking people in the lobby start to mumble between themselves. “Little mortal godlings like you don’t just get a pass. I’ve had enough of your lot causing trouble for centuries already! Do you think I get paid enough to deal with your silly quests? No. Get lost before *I* make you.”

Percy stands frozen for a moment, his mind rushing. Charon’s words echo back at him. They sound like what receptionists say to his mom whenever she has to go through interviews at private schools, since they look and are poor. They never think she’ll be able to convince the owners or the principals to let him in, but she always has. Percy’s only seen it once, for Yancy, how her voice got all soft and warm, charming, filling his ears with cotton and making him feel good inside. By the end of the interview, Percy was enrolled with a learning-disabilities scholarship.

He thought that was just because she’s his mom, and she can do anything she wants—except break up with Gabe. Now, knowing what he knows about this world, knowing about magic and demigods, gods and monsters, he doubts it. He remembers her words in Montauk, still. And, beyond that, he remembers his mom grinning at him, wild and sharp as they got ice-cream after that interview, and leaning in to speak to him like they were sharing a secret.

“Wanna know why all those receptionists are so crusty, Percy?” She asked him, eating a mouthful of her strawberry ice-cream with a spoon. “It’s

because they're underpaid, and they deal with all kinds of unreasonable people all day. They want tips. You know I've worked a couple jobs like that—I get it. I sometimes got like that too. But, now you know, if you ever want to get them to listen to you..."

Money. Of course.

Percy pulls out the bag with drachmas that they got from Crusty and watches Charon's eyes zero-in on it at the twinkling noise it causes. He pulls out three drachmas and slides them over the desk. He doesn't have the confidence or the talent his mom does to sweet talk people, but he hopes he sounds confident enough.

"We got the passage fee," he says, ignoring Annabeth's skeptical sideways look, the way she was already reaching for her dagger. "That's your job, right? You let people in, you get your tips. Why should this be different?"

"You think I can be bought, godling?" Charon spits out the words, but they lack fire, since his eyes are glancing down at the coins with a hungry look. The ghosts are restless, but now they seem more intrigued than panicked. "Are those... authentic?"

"You know Crusty down a block from here?" Percy asks, raising an eyebrow as he dives his hand into the bag—mostly to hide his nervous shaking, but also to pull out a handful of coins, letting them drop back down into the bag one by one. Charon licks his lips as he nods. "He's my brother—was. I decided to take a loan from him while he reformed. I'm pretty sure these are real, Mr. Charon."

Charon sighs and leans over the desk, his fingers hovering over the coins as if charmed. Then he blinks and straightens up, frowning, a growl forming in his throat. "No. No, I'm not doing this, kid. Get out—"

"Okay," Percy nods, and takes back his coins before Charon can react. His mouth drops open with genuine despair. "No service, no tip, though. Shame. You like tailored suits, right?"

“Yes,” Charon nods dumbly, tilting his head in confusion, eyes still on his bag. “Why, thank you for noticing—”

“Does Lord Hades even pay you enough for those?” Percy cuts in, pressing his lips together with pretend concern. “You look really good. And you know, people die every day. You must work really hard. Surely, he pays you that much?”

Charon lets out a sharp breath and it’s like the camel’s back breaks. “No, actually! I’ve been wanting a raise for ages!”

As they get into the elevator, Charon very happily waving his coin bag around, Annabeth shoots him a weird look, but she almost seems impressed. “Where did you learn to do that?”

“Do what?” Percy asks, trying not to stare too hard at Charon, who the further they go down, the less human he looks. He notices Percy looking and sends him a wink, which is really, really weird when he can see his skull.

“Hustle people,” Annabeth answers. “That was the smartest thing I’ve seen you do all trip.”

Percy feels irritation spark inside him because that is such a backhanded compliment, but decides to just let it go. “Thanks, I guess.”

“You should’ve seen Percy in Yancy sometimes,” Grover comments, sticking closer to his side. “I don’t know how he got out of some things.”

“I learned from my mom,” Percy admits, feeling his heart constrict in his chest. He’s so, so close. Grover snuffles. “She’s a badass.”

Annabeth seems skeptical, but she nods. “Sounds like it. I suppose some mortals just have good skills.”

The elevator turns into a boat, and Grover grabs both his and Annabeth’s hands. Annabeth doesn’t seem too happy about it, but Percy can tell she

appreciates the reminder that they're not, in fact, dead. Percy just squeezes Grover's hand, hard.

The River Styx flows under them. He tries to listen to whatever Charon is saying about it being polluted with hopes and dreams, but all Percy can feel is the sway of the boat, like a grounding force, and the rushing of the river, calling to him.

What was it that Queen Amphitrite had said to him, when he blurted out a curse that he'd gotten used to hearing from camp at her?

Wrong relative.

Huh.



## 7. Chapter 7

### Notes for the Chapter:

oh boy i've not had the time to focus on writing for this in a while so this is officially the chapter where i've caught up to my wip. i apologize if this is a little less polished than usual, but i am happy with this chapter. it was a ton of fun to write. as always guys, thanks for the support and i have you enjoy!

When they step off the boat, what Percy thought might turn into a sneak mission in order to get to Hades' throne room gets intercepted, when they're still staring at Cerberus.

"Ah, here you are," says a soft, frail voice, delicate and sending a wave of cold panic through the three of them. They turn, and Percy pulls out Riptide, but he stops dead at the sight of the woman in front of them. Tall, pale, with white hair and violet eyes, and a peaceful expression. She seems extremely out of place, standing here, within earshot of the torture dungeon and the three-headed dog. "I thought I sensed non-dead souls."

"My Lady!" Grover squeaks, bowing his head. Annabeth and Percy exchange a look, unsure about following. "Oh, Lady Makaria, we didn't mean—"

"It's okay, sweetie," Lady Makaria looks curiously down at Riptide. "Rest assured, you're not in trouble yet."

That yet isn't very inspiring, Percy thinks, watching as Annabeth nervously steps forwards. "My Lady, it is an honor to meet you. Your work is admirable."

"Thank you," Lady Makaria giggles, an unearthly cold sound that still manages to be sweet. "I do love my heroes, but I'm afraid you cannot be here, children."

“How did you even find us?” Percy asks, still unwilling to lower Riptide. Lady Makaria stares at the tip of the sword, humming. “We were being... sneaky.”

“Well, everyone knows you're here,” Lady Makaria tilts her head; there's something about her that unsettles him. Her eyes lack the glossy shine he's come to associate with being alive. Her skin is entirely too pale, her lips lacking coloration. She looks dead, yet she moves and speaks like she's just a floating cloud. Like a ghost. Her words aren't reassuring. “It's very easy to tell the dead from the living, as you may imagine.”

Grover audibly swallows. “My Lady... does that mean your father—”

“Yes. He is expecting you,” Lady Makaria sighs, shrugging like it's not a big deal. Percy's heart starts racing in his chest. “I wasn't supposed to be here today, but I couldn't help myself. I'm more curious about what you got there, however.”

Lady Makaria reaches out with a thin finger, the nail painted a rosy pastel, and touches the strap of Percy's—Ares'—backpack.

“Uh,” Percy squirms, because even though she didn't touch him directly, he feels it cooling it down to his bones. He struggles not to shiver. “A reward from Ares, from a quest.”

“Dear Hades,” Lady Makaria raises her eyebrows, her peaceful expression pulling into a frown. “It is a good thing I found you, instead of my husband or my sister, and that my mother is out for the summer. Otherwise, you'd be in a lot of trouble.”

“I assumed we are anyways,” Annabeth presses her lips together, looking around as if considering making a run for it. “We shouldn't be here after all, right?”

“My father will handle you,” Lady Makaria waves it away with a huff of breath, and Percy does shiver this time, watching it come out of her mouth, cold enough it's visible. “If someone tries to stop you on your path, tell them Makaria let you through. Your meeting with my father is urgent.”

They stand there in shock, waiting for the other shoe to drop; maybe Lady Makaria will suddenly grow teeth and claws and try to turn them into ribbons of flesh for daring to think she was serious. But she just stares back at them, a pleasant smile on her lips.

Percy clears his throat, since he has the most practice with goddesses—well, one goddess. It counts. “Thank you, Lady Makaria. You're, uh, very kind, for a goddess.”

Lady Makaria smiles, her grin a little too sharp, but just as sweet. “Thank you, little hero. My husband says I always brighten his days.”

“Oh, that's nice,” Percy lets out, and ignores Grover's warning hold on his shoulder. “And who is that?”

“Why, Death, of course,” Lady Makaria giggles and blushes, making her almost look normal, as Percy blinks back at her in shock. Annabeth face palms herself, and he throws her a stink eye—it's not exactly his fault that he never got to the Obscure Underworld Gods section of their classes at camp. “Good luck, children. And if you die and your place is in Elysium, I'll be happy to guide you through!”

They keep on going. Cerberus proves to be real sweet, once he has a sniff at them and seems to somehow get the idea that Lady Makaria approves of their existence. Annabeth actually softens for the first time in their whole trip, petting him for a bit too long to be casual, and as they continue through the Fields of Asphodel, workers and spirits alike ignore them, throwing odd glances their way.

Ares' backpack is getting heavy enough to slow him down. “Grover, your turn.”

“No way, it's Annabeth's turn,” Grover shakes his head. “I carried it all the way until we got off that boat.”

“I'm not carrying that,” Annabeth rolls her eyes. “It can't even be that heavy, it only has some clothes and Oreos. You guys are so dramatic.”

Percy frowns. "It feels like I'm carrying a brick."

Annabeth snorts. "Well, you're kinda tiny, so—"

"Hey!"

Grover's shoes start lifting him up in the air. The three of them stare down at them. "What the hell?"

"It's not time to play around, Grover," Annabeth rolls her eyes, grabbing Grover's wrist to pull him down, but his shoes start fluttering even more, raising him up despite his attempts at turning them off, just out of their reach. "What the—?"

Percy reaches out and grabs his leg, almost getting a kick to his nose, but Grover slips away from him as the shoes start to fly him away. "Dude—take them off!"

Grover reaches down but it upsets his balance and he falls, hitting the ground on his back. For a single second, the shoes still.

But they remained stunted for one second too long, because then the shoes start flying away, dragging Grover through the dirt of the Fields of Asphodel. He reaches out at them with a hand. "Help! Oh, gods, Maia! *Maia!*"

"Shit," Percy lets out under his breath, immediately running after him, Annabeth right with him. Every spirit remains uncaring and the shoes just seem to pick up speed, though Grover struggling seems to be doing a decent job at slowing him down just enough that they don't lose him from sight.

Percy's thinking that Hades is probably not going to appreciate them bursting into his palace like this, when the shoes take a sharp right and lead them down a tunnel. Percy's lungs fill with the scent of rotten eggs, acid and nauseating, and as the walls narrow and the path gets darker, he starts to get a bad feeling, like he should be running away.

This is where he starts recognizing his surroundings, and he would've stopped dead if Annabeth hadn't grabbed his wrist, the sight of Grover screaming and clawing at the gravel as the shoes lead him straight into the pit far more panic-inducing.

He feels a flash of rage, because he can feel the presence in the pit, almost hearing that voice laughing, so he can't help but yell. "Hey!"

It echoes, loud enough that he feels it in his teeth, the kind of projecting of his voice that he hates, and it's like the whole pit shivers with it. Most importantly, the shoes slow down. Annabeth gasps.

"Percy, tell them to stop!"

Percy doesn't need to hear it twice. "Hold up, you stupid pair of glorified Converse!"

The shoes stop, fluttering as if confused. Grover lets out a whimper and instantly reaches out to grab them, but it doesn't last long, because they regain strength. But they're close enough now, so Percy and Annabeth grab onto Grover, keeping their feet firmly on the ground, dragging him back.

"Percy, keep talking!" Annabeth exclaims, tangling her arm with Grover's. She seems to have a lot more strength than he does, which is something he hadn't noticed before but is coming along handy, because they're almost at the edge of the pit now. "I don't plan to be a menacing pit entity's snack, thank you!"

"Stay still!" He yells at the shoes. For a second they fight harder and that almost makes them trip, but then they come to a stop, and they pull Grover back as far as they can before they start up again. Percy grunts. "Stop! Hey, stop it!"

They still again. Grover quickly reaches down and takes them off, panting, and makes a motion as if he's going to throw them. "Good riddance!"

Percy takes the shoes from him, grabs Annabeth's hoodie tied around his waist and ties them up inside it. This time, when they try lurching away, the

hoodie keeps them sufficiently on a leash. Percy hisses at them one last time. “Stop it! I will make my step dad wear you!”

The shoes stop fluttering, and then the three of them stare at each other in shocked silence. A chill creeps up Percy’s spine and without saying anything to Annabeth and Grover, he starts walking back the way they came, dragging them with him, wanting to get away from this as soon as possible.

They shove the shoes in the outer pocket of Ares’ backpack and move on.

“Percy,” Annabeth calls once they’re back out of the cave, the sudden change in atmosphere from the oppressive darkness of that pit to this higher Underworld level making him dizzy. “Was that charmspeak?”

Percy blinks, then frowns. “What? No.”

“It seemed like charmspeak,” Grover comments, and Percy turns his frown to him. Grover raises his hands up in innocence. “Just saying!”

Percy thinks of the Siren Song incident at camp, what seems like forever ago, and decides not to think about it too hard right now. He can hear the Kindly Ones flying overhead, as they make the trek back towards Hades’ palace, which just seems to him like proof enough that they have more pressing matters at hand. It doesn’t matter how he did it, just that he did.

“What was that pit?” He asks. His shoulder is heavy with Ares’ backpack and every second that passes he wants to go get it far, far away from whatever that was. “It couldn’t have been Hades, right?”

“No,” Annabeth agrees, biting her lip. Percy can practically see the cogs in her brain turning as she thinks. Then, she throws a cautious look out at the palace, then at Grover, until she finally looks at him. “That was... maybe an entrance to Tartarus. They’re scattered all over the Underworld—even the mortal world, in deep caverns. Rumor has it the ruins of Rome have a ton, as do some places in Greece.”

Grover takes hold of their hands again, and Percy squeezes him as hard as he can, feeling a cold shiver go up and down his spine.

“One thing at a time,” Grover says, looking pale. Percy doesn’t have the heart to tell him that he fears this pit voice issue might be a little too related to what they’re about to do, as the door to Hades’ palace starts coming closer and closer. “It’ll be fine. It’s totally fine.”

“Don’t jinx it,” Annabeth mumbles, delightful as always, but Percy can’t help but agree in his mind. This isn’t exactly a nice and cozy feeling that’s settling in his bones, after all.

Percy keeps a hand in his pocket, the one not holding Grover’s, as they walk through Hades’ front garden. There are statues of people there, with terrified, tortured gazes. He can’t help but swallow, thinking about whether those souls are trapped there or not, whether they’re still suffering and begging for help. He wonders if any of them gave up, at some point. He wonders how that could be better than trying to survive the gods, in Medusa’s eyes.

“We’re so lucky Queen Persephone isn’t here,” Grover whispers, once they make it past the garden and into the courtyard. “She must be pissed that her statue provider got nuked.”

For the sake of his sanity, Percy decides not to examine that.

Instead, Percy lets his eyes wander over the obsidian walls, depicting images of human suffering, but he notices, as they shift, other kinds of deaths—an old man surrounded by his family, a noble sacrifice, an unfortunate sickness. Despite the cold air of the Underworld that makes it harder and harder to breathe, despite the feeling crawling under his skin that makes him want to go back to water and surface-level land as soon as possible, he finds it reassuring.

He thinks of his mom, and feels tears prickling his eyes, but Percy forces it down, swallowing, wipes at them with the sleeve of Annabeth’s hoodie. He remembers Queen Amphitrite’s words, Thalia’s warning in a dream, and

straightens up, steels himself. He has to be strong if he's gonna get through this.

When they get to the main doors, there are two guards, one at each side. One of them is dressed like a Confederate soldier and the other as an U.S. marine. Their skin is pale and sickly, their eyes marked with purple bags, and the longer Percy looks at them, much like with Charon back in the elevator, the more dead they look, until all that's left is chunks of skin and muscle clinging to their skeletons. He holds back a shiver.

"We're here to meet with Lord Hades," Percy says, trying to appear confident. The guards stare at him for a second, unmoving, unblinking—well, the one that has eyes doesn't blink. It's disturbing, but he stands his ground, and watches Annabeth and Grover do the same, raising their chins, squaring their shoulders. The quest has not gone like he thought it would, not at all, but in the end, he's glad he at least has them. "We got... urgent things to discuss with him."

A pause, and then the doors open on their own. The guards step aside slightly, lowering the weapons on their hands. As they walk in, obviously invited, Percy feels their stares drilling into the back of his head.

He looks ahead at the throne room and his breath catches.

Hades' palace looks majestic from the outside, if macabre and gloomy. But on the inside, the dark obsidian walls are adorned with golden details, bringing the pictures out more clearly. The floor reflects the ceiling, a black, cold marble that seems to want to suck him into the ground, if he lowers his guard a little too much.

A brazier sits in the middle of the room, as does the hearth, similar to how it is at camp. They're made of lustrous gold, and the light seems to come solely from it, somehow lighting up the whole room and letting them clearly see the sight set in front of them.

Percy has met quite a few gods during this quest; too many, in fact. But gazing up at the huge throne in front of him, carved with detail he's not sure his mind can fully comprehend, with gold armrest and precious jewels



dotted everywhere over a black obsidian base, Lord Hades is, by far, the most intimidating figure.

Ten feet tall, he sits dignified and comfortable, a king in his court. Pale, with eyes black like crow feathers, his hair long, with a widow's peak and over his shoulders. A crown of braided gold and jewels sits on his head, and his robes are pure silk; Percy doesn't doubt that if he moved he would not make a single sound.

A throne sits empty right next to him, just as detailed, just as intimidating despite it being empty. It's equally leveled with Hades' throne, and the way he has a hand over the little space between them resting at the arm tells Percy that the Underworld is Persephone's as much as it is Hades', and he's rather comfortable with it.

Doing what comes naturally, Percy drops to a knee and bows his head, hearing Grover and Annabeth do the same, one step behind him. "Lord Hades."

Quiet, for a moment, and then Hades speaks, his voice surprisingly gentle—not warm, no. But a lot like Makaria's. "Rise, Perseus Jackson."

He does. Annabeth and Grover don't, which seems to be the right thing to do, because Hades raises an eyebrow at the three of them and tilts his chin up with what appears to be satisfaction. Percy stares at him and waits. The corner of Hades' mouth quirks up, sharp, but not unkind.

"What is this?" He asks, drumming his fingernails against his armrest. Every slide of them against the gold echoes in a way his voice doesn't, as if reminding them that they're still in a place full of suffering and pain. "A respectful demigod, in this day and age? Two of you? Times must truly be changing."

He doesn't know what to say to that, so Percy shrugs. "Well, you are my uncle, aren't you, my Lord?"

Hades' eyebrow raises and he leans forwards as if to take a closer look at him. He hums. "I see you're as charming as your mother, Perseus."

A jolt goes through his body and his breath audibly catches in the silence of the room, but he just clears his throat and pushes through it. “Is that a good thing, my Lord?”

“Maybe it is, maybe it isn’t,” Hades chuckles, and even though it seems pleasant, the sound feels wrong, much like Makaria’s giggles did. “Now, tell me, Son of Poseidon, what could’ve possibly convinced you to come to my realm, after what you’ve done? After committing the crime of being born, and then after taking what isn’t yours?”

Percy swallows. “That’s the thing, Lord Hades. I think there’s been a mistake.”

“A mistake?” Hades repeats with a scowl, looking unimpressed. “You think you can lie your way out of this, boy? I’ve known your siblings; your father pretends you aren’t, but the lot of you are pirates. You are thieves and mercenaries, walking hurricanes. It’s in your blood, along with the sea. And all the fingers point to *you*, dear nephew.”

“I—” Percy’s nerves get the best of him and he fidgets, but Hades just keeps staring, waiting for a response. Percy clears his throat. “Here’s the thing, Lord Hades—I didn’t know I’m a demigod until a couple weeks ago.”

Hades stares for a second. Then, he laughs. The sound bounces against the obsidian and seems to overwhelm Percy’s senses, ten feet of sound surrounding him, sharp and dry and cold. Just as fast, though, the laughter stops, and Hades glares down at him.

“Would you look at that,” Hades muses, looking him up and down. “Your mother wasn’t lying, after all.”

This time, Percy can’t help himself. He blurts the words out. “You spoke to her?”

“Of course,” Hades leans back against his throne, huffing. “She resisted the magical trance I attempted to put her in. We spoke. She defended you. We reached an agreement.”

Percy swallows. He doesn't know if he wants to know what that agreement entails, not yet, but he forces himself to stay strong and unwavering. "If you spoke to her then you know I'm telling the truth, Lord Hades. I couldn't have possibly stolen anything."

"Then what do you have there, boy?" Hades stands, his expression dark, pulled back into a scowl. He walks towards them and starts shrinking until he towers over him at just six-feet-something, glaring down at Percy from an arm's length away. Without saying a word, Hades reaches out and takes Ares' backpack from him. "Do you think I'm blind—?"

"Lord Ares gave me that," Percy cuts in, deciding to risk it. Hades clenches the backpack in his hand and if possible, the room gets colder. Percy shivers, squirms, and feels like the floor wants to swallow him. "Please, Lord Hades. Hear us out. There's been a misunderstanding—I didn't steal anything. The lightning bolt—"

"I don't care about my brother's little toy, boy!" Hades exclaims, and almost tears Ares' backpack open by the zipper. Oreos and clothes tumble out, and then, inexplicably, a cylinder of pure, white energy. Percy pales, but somehow, he isn't surprised. "This thing? It doesn't matter to me. I have my own issues! I don't care if you stole my brother's bolt or not, what I care about is what I've been robbed of!"

"Wait," Percy swallows, a thousand thoughts rushing through his head at once. He remembers the Furies in the bus, remembers Ares telling him he told his dad Hades was behind this. "Lord Hades, you—you lost something too?"

"I didn't *lose* anything," Hades crosses his arms, nostrils flaring, and turns to return to his throne. "My helmet of darkness was stolen from me, boy, when I last visited Olympus! This is the last time I'll ever set foot in that wretched place, and all everyone is saying is that *you* were responsible. So, where is it, boy?!"

"I have no idea," Percy looks down at the remnants of his backpack, Luke's shoes trying to unsuccessfully kick their way out, and the cylinder of energy on the floor. Then, he looks back at Grover and Annabeth. "What?"

“We’ve been tricked,” Annabeth breathes out, shaking her head in horror, but her mind seems to be miles ahead of him. “This—this makes too much sense. The pointing fingers, the timing, the Kindly Ones—”

Percy turns back towards Hades. “Is—is this why you sent those monsters after me?”

“Why else would I have? Oh, you were born, big deal! Your father could never keep it in his pants,” Hades rolls his eyes, ignoring the strangled, embarrassed sound Percy lets out. “I knew the second Zeus’ daughter appeared that I would be ridiculed again, kept to a promise neither of my brothers could keep! I set terrors free upon her as revenge; neither I nor your father wished to keep this stupid oath, and we were willing to let Zeus have a taste of his own medicine.”

“But she didn’t *do* anything—”

“She was born!” Hades slams his hand down on his throne, the sound echoing. “She refused her father’s favors, the path Athena set for her! I could kill you right here, right now, boy, and no one would stop me. No one would be able to say I don’t have a right to! Not even your father, unless he wanted to inflict war upon me!”

Percy’s head is pounding. “So, hold on, you *don’t* want a war—?”

“If you don’t want me to blast you and your mother to pieces, Perseus Jackson, you’ll stop babbling at me,” Hades interrupts, glaring down at him. He extends a hand out and Zeus’ bolt goes flying into his hand, crackling the air with electricity. Hades stares at it looking disgusted and angry in equal parts. “I will keep this, as an insurance. A war over this—*please*. My brothers are squabbling idiots; when you’re born obtuse you’re born obtuse, there’s no way around it!”

“Sir,” Percy says, swallowing, trying to set them back on track. “Sir, why did Lord Ares give me a backpack with his dad’s bolt? It’s—it’s supposed to be missing—”

“Why don’t you ask him?” Hades crosses his legs and leans back on his throne, leaning his chin on his hand with a grace that sends shivers down his spine. “He’s right above us right now. Perhaps he knows where my Helmet of Darkness is.”

Percy stares. “Are you giving us a quest?”

“I’m giving you a chance to live,” Hades rolls his eyes as if Percy’s being dense. “Do you think I want a war, Percy Jackson? After all the souls I already have to deal with? My wife and I are overrun, and money doesn’t grow on trees! I’ve been shunned and disrespected—those Olympians, fighting each other, never agreeing! The council meetings are a headache!”

Hades pauses his rant, scowling at him. He points a finger at Percy. “If my nephew gave you his father’s bolt, child, you will find out why. You will find out if he has my helmet, and you will *retrieve it*. If I sense even a drop of doubt from you, Perseus Jackson, I will feed you to my dog. I will open the Underworld and let the dead roam free. But if you succeed...”

Hades waves his hand, and the two guards outside open the doors. Percy turns, sees them dragging someone in.

His heart rises to his throat. “Mom?”

She looks up. She’s wearing white robes, too big on her, and her eyes are unfocused, her skin pale and tired. The second she hears him, though, she perks up, straightens. The guards dig their skeleton hands into her skin, but she keeps walking, until she’s right in front of him.

“Percy,” Mom says, reaching out to him. She runs a hand through his hair, and Percy makes a sound, hurt, and raw. Her eyes well up with tears. “Percy —”

He throws himself at her. Wrapping his arms around her middle, pressing his face against her chest, Percy trembles and holds back a sob and almost decides to give it all up right this second, just for this, for the feeling of his mom holding him. Nothing else matters; he’s home. The grief in his chest

unravels and he's about to open his mouth, pull out Queen Amphitrite's pearls and run far, far away from all these gods and monsters and demigods.

But then his mom grabs his shoulders, hard, pushes him back, and looks into his eyes with what now feels like a familiar, frantic energy. "Percy, baby, you shouldn't be here."

"I came for you," Percy lets out, choking up. "Mom, I only came for you —"

"No," Mom tightens her grip on him, digging her nails in. She turns towards Hades. "Please, my Lord. Let them go—I know my son. He will recover what is yours."

"Don't make promises for him," Hades sneers, and looks at Percy. "What will you do, little hero? Die here, or do well by us?"

Percy looks at him, then looks at his mom. Her hands around him are bruising but familiar and she looks like she might beg him to go, and Percy doesn't want to. He doesn't want a lot of things.

He doesn't want to face Ares again. He doesn't want to recover people's things because gods are incapable of looking after their own stuff, from the look of it. He just wants to go home and pretend the last month of his life has been a bad, bad nightmare. Percy wants to wake up at Yancy where Grover is still his best friend that can only run when enchiladas are on the line, where Mr. Brunner will look at him with those dark, beady eyes of his, where he'll get letters from his mom every week as they count down the days 'til break together.

Instead, he's standing in an ostentatious palace of dark stone and dead spirits, where warmth is a foreign concept, and his mom is telling him to go, and the world is telling him to fix its problems by himself.

Percy slips his hand in his pocket, thumbing Queen Amphitrite's pearls. He thinks of her earlier words, and Percy's never thought that life was fair in any way, but only now he can truly feel the consequences of reality being what it is.

The prophecy echoes in his ears, *and you shall fail to save what matters most, in the end.*

His choice was made for him the second he took the quest, wasn't it?

He meets Hades' eyes. "Just one thing, uncle."

Hades raises an eyebrow, no doubt at the way he addresses him. "What is it, child?"

"If I do find your helmet, I won't have time to come back here," Percy swallows, wondering if it's too risky, but his mom squeezes his shoulder and Percy feels like this is probably a point of no return in his life. "So someone else has to get it from me. And then... then you send the bolt with my mom to New York. Safe and sound. Can we agree on that?"

There's silence that threatens to suffocate him as Hades stares him down, thinking. Then, the corner of his mouth quirks up with a dark satisfaction that perhaps, in someone else, in someone like Ares, would feel malicious. In his, Hades just looks like a rather self-satisfied businessman.

"We can, little nephew. If you succeed, your mother shall be waiting at the lobby of the Empire State Building with my brother's little toy. I will be watching. Everything *you* find out, I will, too," Hades nods. He looks at his mom, who has relaxed. "He takes after you. You should be thankful for that."

Mom presses her lips together with a serious nod. "I am, my Lord. Always will be."

Then Percy turns towards Grover and Annabeth, who have since stood up and are staring between him and his mom with a mixture of shock and uncertainty. He exchanges a look with each of them, watches as Grover sighs and squares his shoulders and Annabeth raises an expectant eyebrow at him, already reaching her hand out.

He slips a pearl into each of their hands. Then, Percy turns towards his mom and hugs her, kisses her cheek without shame just like he's used to,

mumbling in her ear.

“Gods bless you, Percy,” Mom whispers back, kissing his forehead. Then she takes a single step back. “I’m already so, so proud of you.”

He feels himself choking up again and realizes he has no more words for her. He can’t bear it. Instead, he steps back to stand with Grover and Annabeth, and looks at his uncle.

Percy shrugs at him. “Charon wants a raise, by the way.”

The last thing Percy hears as they rise up and up and up, through the different levels of the Underworld, is his mom’s laugh, bringing joy to an otherwise cold hell, and his uncle’s groan of extreme frustration.

The second they’re taken up to the Coast Guard boat, Annabeth grabs his elbow. “Percy, your mom is a demigod.”

“What?” Percy frowns at her, shaking his head. “No, there’s no way. Her parents died in a plane crash.”

Annabeth looks like she wants to protest, but Grover breaks in. “We have more important problems, though. After all of that... is Lord Ares the thief? Was he seriously just trying to start a war?”

“I wouldn’t doubt it,” Annabeth brings a hand up to her chin, looking down into the water. She glances at Percy, and does a double take, frowning. “You got your backpack back.”

He startles—it’s true. It’s so light now, Percy hadn’t noticed, but the backpack Ares gave him is back on his shoulders. He takes it off, dreading what might be in it; what if the lightning bolt was enchanted to always return to it, just like Riptide will always return to his pockets?

Instead of a cylinder of electricity, though, Percy almost gets kicked on the face by Grover’s shoes. He narrowly avoids them, but he drops the backpack and Annabeth has to catch them, still tangled up in her hoodie,



before they fly away. Grover helps her hold on to them, and as soon as Percy recovers his bearings, he yells.

“Quit it!” He says, and the shoes stop, much like in the pit. They shove them back in the backpack and stare at it for a second.

“Lord Hades knew we’d need them,” Annabeth finally speaks up, after the silence starts getting a little too long. She looks at Percy, her eyes calculating. “You’re going to need to show these to Lord Zeus, when we get into Olympus.”

“When I get into Olympus,” Percy corrects her, and Annabeth frowns, but doesn’t fight the implications of his words. The gods want *him*. She’s going to have to be okay with whatever glory she can get at camp, if they even make it that far. “Annabeth, you do know what this means, right?”

She stares at Percy’s backpack like she wants nothing more than to throw it overboard, yet only crosses her arms. “There must be something we’re missing. Luke wouldn’t do this.”

“Either he got tricked too,” Grover says, but he also doesn’t seem fond of the idea. “Or he’s working with that voice in the pit, Annabeth.”

“That’s just Lord Ares, playing tricks on us again,” Annabeth snaps at them, but she doesn’t sound like she actually believes herself. Percy, very briefly, pities her for it. “He stole the bolt and the helmet. He’s trying to start a war.”

“Ares is a prick,” Percy says, shrugging the backpack over his shoulders. “But I don’t think he’d do the dirty job himself. No god would.”

A shiver runs down Percy’s spine, and he remembers Hades’ words about watching him. “Luke is the son of Hermes, Annabeth. He’s the god of thieves. And, didn’t you say campers go to Olympus once a year on the solstice?”

“Anyone could’ve done it,” Annabeth protests, but her attempt to fight it is fickle. “Anyone there. It doesn’t mean it was him.”

“He gave us the shoes,” Grover points out, and Annabeth glares, but it’s half-hearted. She already knows they’re right. “Annabeth...”

“Fine,” Annabeth spits out. “It was Luke. Happy? He probably got tricked. Luke knows better. He resents the gods, but he wouldn’t...”

She doubts herself. Percy doesn’t blame her—he wants to doubt it, too. He wants to believe some voice from Tartarus, which as far as he remembers houses things worse than Hades and Ares themselves, didn’t rope Luke into some scheme for him to take his anger out. Or, if that did happen, he hopes that Luke regrets it.

But he remembers that sadistic glint to his eye, and thinks that it’s not really a high bar, for how he thinks the rest of his quest will develop.

“By sunset today,” Percy says, dropping the subject. He doesn’t think there’s much they can do about that, not with Hades listening. “Only a couple things can happen. I recover Hades’ helmet, and we somehow make it back to New York so I can meet up with my mom. I hand over the bolt. I either get killed, or I don’t. And...”

Here, Percy swallows. Neither Annabeth nor Grover dare to cut in, letting him finish his train of thought, since they already know where it’s going. “And if I don’t recover the helm, Uncle Hades kills me. He keeps Lord Zeus’s bolt. My dad—the gods, they might all go to war over it.”

They can’t let that happen. The sentiment seems to resonate among them, quiet but overbearing. They don’t exchange any other words for the remaining time on their boat ride.

When they step off the boat, they make their way down to the beach.

Ares is waiting for them, leaning against his bike. He catches sight of them and smirks.

Percy swallows, and keeps walking forwards to meet his fate.